



The International Relations of the Dead: Transboundary Ancestral Claims and Regional Conflict in West Africa

Owa Egbara OWA

Department of Political Science,
University of Calabar, Cross River, Nigeria

Email: owaegbaraowa001@gmail.com

(Received: May-2025; **Accepted:** November -2025; Available **Online:** November - 2025)



This is an open access article distributed under the Creative Commons Attribution License CC-BY-NC-4.0 ©2025 by author (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>)

ABSTRACT

The prevailing Westphalian paradigm in International Relations (IR), which centers on the sovereign, territorial state as the primary actor, proves inadequate for diagnosing and resolving a distinct class of protracted conflicts in post-colonial Africa. This article posits that conflicts fueled by transboundary ancestral claims—assertions of rights and belonging based on kinship groups' sacred connections to burial grounds, shrines, and historical territories straddling modern borders—constitute a unique category of ontological security dilemma. We introduce the concept of “Ancestral Sovereignty” to theorize the spiritual and cultural authority that emanates from these connections, challenging the monopoly of the modern state. This framework moves beyond the materialist and secular biases of mainstream IR theories by arguing that the veneration of ancestors and the custodianship of their resting places generate a potent, non-state form of political agency. Through a comparative case study analysis of the adjudicated but unresolved Nigeria-Cameroon dispute over the Bakassi Peninsula and the latent tensions of the partitioned Ewe nation across the Ghana-Togo border, this paper demonstrates how ancestral attachments foster resistance to international legal rulings and sustain irredentist sentiments. The analysis reveals that the intractability of these disputes stems from a fundamental clash between the state's cartographic rationality and the community's sacred geography, a clash that regional bodies like the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) are institutionally ill-equipped to manage. The paper concludes by proposing a substantive recalibration of regional conflict resolution mechanisms, advocating for the formal integration of traditional governance structures and the adoption of an ontological security lens to forge a more culturally-grounded and sustainable peace in regions where the dead remain constitutive agents in the political realm.

Keywords: Benin kingdom; British Government; Minimalist Policy; West Africa.

INTRODUCTION: THE LIMINAL CARTOGRAPHIES OF BEING AND BELONGING

The political map of contemporary Africa, a legacy of the 1884-85 Berlin Conference, presents a tableau of neat, linear boundaries that purport to demarcate mutually exclusive sovereignties. Yet, beneath this veneer of statist order lies a far more complex and vibrant human topography, one etched not by colonial cartographers but by the deep histories of migration, kinship, and spiritual belief (Herbst, 2014; Mamdani, 2018). Conventional analyses of conflict in regions such as West Africa have predominantly been funneled through theoretical lenses that privilege material interests—the scramble for oil, water, or fertile land—or the politicization of ethnic identity (Fearon & Laitin, 2011; Collier & Hoeffler, 2004). While these explanations offer valuable insights, they frequently fall short of capturing the profound, culturally-embedded resonance of certain territorial claims and the seemingly irrational persistence of local resistance in the face of overwhelming state power or international legal consensus.

The 2002 ruling of the International Court of Justice (ICJ) on the Bakassi Peninsula dispute, for instance, was a triumph of liberal institutionalism, resolving the inter-state conflict between Nigeria and Cameroon through legal arbitration. However, for the indigenous Efik, Efut, and Ibibio communities, this ruling was not a closure but a violent rupture, an edict that demanded the desecration of their ancestral graves and the severance of a sacred covenant with the land that housed the bones of their forebears (Udeg-bunam, 2021; Eze, 2022). This critical lacuna in mainstream International Relations scholarship compels a fundamental re-examination of the very actors and agencies that constitute the international. This paper, therefore, seeks to answer a pivotal question: In what ways do cosmological beliefs and socio-cultural practices surrounding ancestors—specifically their perceived ongoing presence, their burial sites, and their sacred territories—generate a potent, non-state form of sovereignty that actively shapes transboundary conflicts and challenges the efficacy of regional security architectures in West Africa?

I contend that to fully apprehend the stubborn intractability of conflicts like *Bakassi*, or the simmering irredentism of partitioned groups like the *Ewe*, it is imperative to expand the scope of IR analysis to include what I term “**Ancestral Sovereignty**.” This concept describes a system of authority and legitimacy derived from a community's inextricable link to its ancestral past, a link that is physically anchored in the land and spiritually maintained through ritual and veneration.

My central thesis is that transboundary ancestral claims produce a distinct genre of international conflict characterized not merely by a contest over resources or political power, but by a fundamental **clash of ontologies**. This is a collision between the modern state's rational-legal, cartographically-defined authority and the pre-colonial, spiritually-informed authority rooted in a community's sacred geography. This framework directly challenges the core anthropocentric and secular assumptions of mainstream IR, which has historically consigned matters of spirituality and ancestral veneration to the realms of anthropology or religious studies, thereby missing their profound geopolitical implications (Shani, 2017; Blanchard & Chan, 2022).

The structure of this paper is designed to systematically build and validate this argument. I begin with a thorough theoretical exegesis, critiquing the limitations of Realism, Liberalism, and Constructivism in accounting for the power of ancestral claims. From this critique, I construct this theoretical framework, elaborating on the three constitutive pillars of Ancestral Sovereignty: posthumous personhood, ontological security, and spiritual jurisdiction.

The methodology section provides a robust justification for the comparative case study approach, selecting the Bakassi Peninsula and the Ewe homeland as exemplars of active and latent conflict respectively. The subsequent empirical subtopics offer a deep,

contextual analysis of each case, foregrounding the narratives of ancestral attachment that persistently defy the logic of the border. A synthesizing comparative analysis then draws out the common threads, explicitly detailing the challenges these ontological conflicts pose for regional bodies like ECOWAS. Finally, I conclude by summarizing my core contributions and advancing a set of concrete, innovative policy prescriptions designed to bridge the gap between state-centric governance and the enduring power of ancestral sovereignty.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: DECONSTRUCTING WESTPHALIA AND CONCEPTUALIZING ANCESTRAL SOVEREIGNTY

The edifice of modern International Relations theory rests upon the foundation of the Westphalian state, an entity claiming supreme, secular authority within a clearly demarcated territory (Krasner, 1999). This model, however, is a poor fit for many African contexts where sovereignty is often layered, contested, and shared among multiple actors, including traditional institutions whose authority predates the colonial state (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013; Branch & Mampilly, 2015). This section delineates the theoretical terrain, first exposing the poverty of conventional IR approaches before meticulously constructing the concept of Ancestral Sovereignty as a more nuanced analytical tool.

The Inadequacies of Mainstream IR Theories

The Materialist Blind Spot of Realism and Neo-realism

For Realist scholars, the international system is an anarchic realm where states, as unitary rational actors, relentlessly pursue power and security (Mearsheimer, 2014). In a dispute like Bakassi, a Realist analysis would rightly focus on the strategic and economic stakes: control over potentially rich offshore oil and gas reserves, dominance of strategic maritime routes in the Gulf of Guinea, and the relative power projection capabilities of Nigeria and Cameroon. While this explains the initial interstate jostling, it fails catastrophically to explain the enduring resistance of the Bakassi people *after* the Nigerian state, a regional hegemon, formally capitulated to the ICJ ruling. The local communities' continued struggle, at great personal risk, cannot be reduced to a calculus of material gain. It is a fight for a sacred geography that is existentially indispensable, a dimension of power that Realism's resolutely materialist ontology is conceptually unequipped to perceive (Agnew, 1994).

The Formalist Limitations of Liberalism and Institutionalism

Liberal IR theory posits that cooperation, international law, and institutions can mitigate anarchy and facilitate peaceful conflict resolution (Keohane, 2005). From this perspective, the Bakassi case is a textbook example of success. A legal dispute was channeled through the world's premier judicial body, a verdict was rendered, and a sophisticated implementation mechanism—the Cameroon-Nigeria Mixed Commission—oversaw a peaceful transfer of authority. Yet, this “success” is entirely confined to the inter-state level. It systematically bypassed and invalidated the claims, identities, and spiritual realities of the local population, whose primary allegiance was not to the abstract authority of the ICJ in The Hague but to the ancestral authority embedded in the soil of Bakassi. Liberalism, with its focus on formal, state-centric institutions, possesses no theoretical apparatus for engaging with this form of non-state, spiritually-grounded legitimacy (Francis, 2023).

The Secular Bias of Constructivism

Constructivism, which emphasizes the socially constructed nature of interests, identities, and norms, provides the most promising entry point among mainstream theories

(Wendt, 1999). A Constructivist would accurately highlight how shared ethnic or clan identities across borders can create powerful irredentist pressures and sustain narratives of a divided nation. However, even Constructivism often operates within a tacitly secular and modern worldview. It tends to analyze “identity” in sociological or political terms, frequently neglecting the deeply embedded spiritual and cosmological dimensions that underpin it. Specifically, it often fails to engage with the belief, central to many African worldviews, that ancestors are conscious, agentive beings whose posthumous well-being is contingent upon the practices of the living, including the protection of their burial sites and the performance of specific rituals on ancestral land (Mbembe, 2001; Ikpe, 2020). This is not just about “culture” or “tradition” as abstract concepts; it is about a lived reality that structures daily life, moral obligations, and political legitimacy.

The Pillars of Ancestral Sovereignty: An Alternative Framework

To overcome these theoretical shortcomings, I propose a framework built on three interconnected and mutually reinforcing pillars that together constitute the architecture of Ancestral Sovereignty.

Pillar One: Posthumous Personhood and the Continuity of Social Being

In many West African cosmological frameworks, personhood is not extinguished by biological death. Rather, it undergoes a transformation. The deceased transitions to the status of an ancestor, remaining an integral member of the corporate community, albeit in a different ontological state (Gyekye, 2012; Mbiti, 2015). These ancestors are not mere memories; they are active, sentient entities with moral agency. They can intercede with higher spiritual forces, bestow blessings upon the living for righteous conduct, and, crucially, mete out punishment—in the form of misfortune, illness, or societal discord—for transgressions. The most grave transgressions include the abandonment of ancestral lands or the desecration of graves (Gbadegesin, 2015). Therefore, the land is not a passive resource to be exploited but a living, spiritual entity—an archive of lineage history and the primary medium for communication with the spiritual world that sustains the community's cosmic order.

Pillar Two: Ontological Security and the Non-Fungibility of Sacred Geography

The concept of ontological security, borrowed from sociology and increasingly applied in IR, refers to the need of actors (both individual and collective) for a stable framework of meaning, a consistent sense of self-identity, and a predictable social order (Mitzen, 2006; Zarakol, 2017). For kinship-based communities, this ontological security is inextricably tied to what I term “sacred geography.” This refers to the specific, non-fungible locations of burial grounds, foundational shrines, sites of origin myths, and ritual landscapes. These sites are unique and irreplaceable. They cannot be compensated for with monetary payment or alternative territory. To be forcibly displaced from these sites is not simply a physical relocation; it constitutes an existential crisis. It severs the temporal continuum that connects the past (ancestors), present (living community), and future (unborn generations), thereby demolishing the very bedrock of the community's identity, history, and sense of place in the cosmos (Eze, 2022; Appiah, 2018). This generates a level of resistance that is qualitatively different from that sparked by economic displacement.

Pillar Three: Spiritual Jurisdiction and the Reality of Competing Sovereignities

The authority that flows from this sacred geography and the institution of posthumous personhood crystallizes into a tangible form of sovereignty—Ancestral Sovereignty. It is

a system of spiritual jurisdiction traditionally exercised by kings, chiefs, and priestly lineages who are perceived as the custodians of the land and the legitimate intermediaries between the realms of the living and the dead (Kyed & Buur, 2022). This authority often exists in a tense, and sometimes directly antagonistic, relationship with the sovereignty of the modern state. When a state action—whether a border demarcation enforced by soldiers, a resource concession granted to a multinational corporation, or the implementation of an international court ruling—threatens a sacred site, it is not merely enforcing a law or policy. It is committing a sacrilege, violating a sacred trust between the living and the dead. This creates a direct and profound clash of sovereignties, pitting the state's legal-rational, derivative (from colonial law) authority against the traditional, spiritually-derived, and historically-rooted authority of the lineage and its traditional rulers (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2009). This clash is not merely a political disagreement; it is a conflict over the very source of legitimate power.

METHODOLOGY: A COMPARATIVE CASE STUDY DESIGN FOR UNPACKING ONTOLOGICAL CONFLICT

To empirically ground and validate my theoretical framework, this paper employs a rigorous qualitative comparative case study methodology. This approach is particularly well-suited for investigating complex social phenomena within their real-life contexts, allowing for an in-depth, holistic, and nuanced analysis that preserves the integrity of the cases while enabling cross-case synthesis (Yin, 2018; George & Bennett, 2005).

Rationale for Case Selection

The selection of cases was guided by a logic of variation on the dependent variable—the manifestation of conflict—while holding constant the core independent variable—the presence of potent transboundary ancestral claims. This allows us to demonstrate the wide spectrum of challenges posed by Ancestral Sovereignty.

1. The Nigeria-Cameroon Border (The Bakassi Peninsula): An Active and Adjudicated Ontological Conflict.

This case represents a scenario of **overt, violent, and legally “resolved” conflict**. The ICJ ruling of 2002 provides a clear, definitive endpoint from a state-centric, liberal-institutionalist perspective. However, the persistent, often violent resistance from indigenous groups, driven explicitly by narratives of ancestral attachment, makes it a critical case for testing for the theory. It serves as a “hard test,” demonstrating the power and persistence of Ancestral Sovereignty even when confronted with the full force of international law and state power (Adebajo, 2021; Igwe, 2020). It shows that legal resolution without ontological reconciliation is a recipe for prolonged, low-intensity instability.

2. The Ghana-Togo Border (The Ewe People): A Latent and Simmering Ontological Conflict.

This case represents a scenario of **dormant, non-violent, but persistently salient conflict**. There is no active warfare, and both Ghana and Togo generally maintain cordial diplomatic relations. However, the Ewe people's powerful sense of a divided nation, continuously reinforced by shared ancestral origins, cross-border pilgrimage to sacred sites, and intertwined chieftaincy affairs, creates a permanent undercurrent of irredentism (Nugent, 2019; Amenuma, 2022). This case is crucial because it illustrates that Ancestral Sovereignty is not only a driver of hot conflicts but also a fundamental, structural challenge to the long-term legitimacy and internal cohesion of the post-colonial state. It represents a perpetual

vulnerability, a flashpoint that can be activated by changes in political or economic circumstances.

Data Collection Strategies and Analytical Procedures

The analysis is founded on a systematic and critical review of a multi-sourced body of evidence, triangulating data to ensure validity and depth.

Historical and Archival Analysis: I trace the colonial genesis of both disputes, examining the 1913 Anglo-German agreement that shaped the Bakassi border and the post-World War I partition of German Togoland by the League of Nations that divided Eweland. This establishes the exogenous and arbitrary nature of the modern border, imposed without regard for pre-existing socio-cultural and spiritual geographies (Nzume, 2021).

Critical Discourse and Narrative Analysis: This forms the core of my empirical investigation. I meticulously analyze a wide range of textual and oral sources to excavate the narratives of Ancestral Sovereignty. These sources include:

1. Petitions and memoranda submitted by community associations and traditional councils to national governments and international bodies.
2. Local and international media reportage on the conflicts.
3. Scholarly works by local historians and cultural anthropologists documenting the oral histories and cosmologies of the affected groups (Umoren, 2020; Gbadegesin, 2015).

Through this analysis, I identify recurring themes, metaphors, and moral claims that link territory to identity and spiritual well-being, demonstrating that these are not post-hoc justifications but deeply held ontological commitments.

- **Policy and Institutional Analysis:** I critically examine the conflict resolution protocols, frameworks, and practical interventions of regional organizations, primarily ECOWAS and the African Union (AU). I analyze key documents like the ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Framework and reports from the Cameroon-Nigeria Mixed Commission to identify their inherent state-centric biases and their systematic failure to engage with, or even acknowledge, the ontological dimensions of these disputes (Francis, 2023; Owusu, 2022).

This multi-method approach allows us to trace the causal pathways through which deeply held beliefs about the dead and their land translate into concrete political action, resistance, and regional insecurity, thereby bridging the gap between abstract theory and on-the-ground reality.

CASE STUDY 1: THE BAKASSI PENINSULA – THE BONES OF THE FATHERS AND THE LAW OF THE FATHERS

The protracted conflict over the Bakassi Peninsula between Nigeria and Cameroon stands as a stark monument to the limitations of a purely Westphalian understanding of territory and sovereignty. It is a case where international law pronounced a final judgment, but the land itself, imbued with the presence of the ancestors, continues to murmur dissent.

The official history of the dispute is one of clashing colonial inheritances. Cameroon's claim rested primarily on the 1913 Anglo-German Agreement, which placed Bakassi within the German sphere of influence in Kamerun. Nigeria, upon independence, argued that historical administration, the wishes of the local population (who were ethnically and culturally linked to Nigeria's Cross River State), and later, the principle of

geographical contiguity, justified its sovereignty over the peninsula (ICJ, 2002). The case was brought before the ICJ, which, in its 2002 judgment, upheld the primacy of the colonial treaty, awarding sovereignty over Bakassi to Cameroon. The subsequent Green Tree Agreement of 2006 outlined a phased withdrawal of Nigerian troops and administration, a process overseen by the UN-backed Cameroon-Nigeria Mixed Commission. For the international community, this was a model of peaceful conflict resolution, averting a potential war between two regional powers (Adebajo, 2021).

For the indigenous communities of Bakassi—primarily the Efik, Efut, and Ibibio—the land is not a “peninsula” but their ancestral homeland, their *itif edik*, or “land of our fathers.” Their claim is not rooted in colonial treaties but in autochthony, a deep historical and spiritual connection that predates the very concept of Nigeria and Cameroon. Their resistance to the ICJ ruling is fundamentally an assertion of Ancestral Sovereignty against what is perceived as an illegitimate imposition of state sovereignty.

The material manifestations of this sovereignty are specific and sacred:

1. **Ancestral Burial Grounds and Royal Cemeteries:** The peninsula is the eternal resting place for generations of kings, village heads, and lineage founders. These graves are not merely memorials; they are active sites of spiritual power and connection. To abandon them is considered the ultimate abomination, an act that would invoke the wrath of the ancestors, leading to spiritual desolation, failed harvests, and societal collapse (Umoren, 2020). As one traditional ruler stated, “We cannot leave the bones of our fathers. To do so is to condemn our people to perpetual curse and wandering” (Cited in Udegbumam, 2021, p. 54).
2. **Sacrificial Shrines and Ritual Landscapes:** Specific groves, rivers, and hills serve as altars for communing with ancestral spirits. Rituals performed at these sites are believed to ensure bounty from the Atlantic Ocean, fertility of the land, and protection from harm. The efficacy of these rituals is tied to their precise location; they are non-transferable. The state's border, in this context, is seen as a profane line drawn through a sacred landscape.
3. **Sites of Historical Foundation and Migration:** The oral histories of these groups are replete with narratives of migration, settlement, and kingdom-building that are physically anchored in the topography of Bakassi. These narratives form the charter of their identity, and the land is the parchment on which this charter is written.

When the Nigerian state complied with the ICJ ruling and withdrew its administration, it was, in the eyes of the Bakassi people, committing a profound betrayal. The state was reneging on its fundamental duty to protect the patrimony of its citizens—a patrimony that includes the sacred heritage of the ancestors. In the power vacuum that followed, traditional rulers and community elders, whose legitimacy flows directly from this sacred geography, became the *de facto* leaders of the resistance. They have consistently framed their struggle not in the language of international law, but in the language of cultural survival and spiritual duty, a clear and potent expression of Ancestral Sovereignty directly challenging the authority of both the Nigerian and Cameroonian states (Eze, 2022; Igwe, 2020).

CASE STUDY 2: THE PARTITIONED EWE – A NATION TETHERED BY ANCESTRAL TOPOGRAPHY

Unlike the violent tumult of Bakassi, the situation of the Ewe people across the Ghana-Togo border represents a quieter, but no less significant, form of ontological conflict. It is the story of a nation whose body was divided by colonialism, but whose soul remains tethered to an undivided sacred geography.

The Ewe people were historically situated in a contiguous territory that was incorporated into the German protectorate of Togoland in the late 19th century. Following Germany's defeat in World War I, the territory was split into two League of Nations Mandates: British Togoland (administered from the Gold Coast) and French Togoland. This arbitrary division was cemented at independence; British Togoland integrated into the new state of Ghana, while French Togoland became the independent Republic of Togo (Amenumey, 2022). This political schism separated families, clans, and traditional states, imposing a hard border where none had existed before.

Despite over a century of political separation and the development of distinct national identities (Ghanaian and Togolese), a powerful sense of Ewe nationhood persists. This enduring unity is actively constructed and reinforced through practices and institutions rooted in Ancestral Sovereignty.

1. **Cross-Border Pilgrimage and Ritual Circuits:** The city of Notsie in present-day Togo holds a central place in Ewe cosmology as the final migratory stop before their dispersal to their current homelands. The grave of their legendary leader, Togbe Tsali, and other sacred sites in Notsie are spiritual epicenters. Annual festivals, such as the Hogbetsotso (Festival of the Exodus), draw thousands of Ewe people from Ghana on a pilgrimage that is both a cultural celebration and a performative reaffirmation of their shared origins and unity across the border (Gbadegesin, 2015). This physical movement across the international boundary is a powerful act that continuously re-maps their ancestral geography over the political map.
2. **The Transboundary Nature of Chieftaincy and Kingship:** The authority of Ewe traditional rulers, particularly the Awoamefia (paramount chief) of Anlo in Ghana, extends across the border in a social and spiritual sense. The installation, legitimization, and burial of chiefs on one side of the border require the participation, endorsement, and ritual expertise of royal families and elders from the other side (Nugent, 2019). Disputes over succession in a Ghanaian Ewe town can quickly become transnational affairs, drawing in actors and influences from Togo. This demonstrates that the authentic jurisdiction of these traditional institutions transcends the state border, creating a durable network of authority that operates in a parallel, and sometimes competing, sphere with the state.
3. **Persistent Irredentist Discourse and Political Memory:** While not advocating for violent secession, a strong narrative of “lost unity” permeates Ewe intellectual and political discourse. Political parties, cultural organizations, and intellectuals in both countries periodically invoke the “artificial” nature of the border and the tragedy of a divided nation (Amenumey, 2022). This discourse is not based on economic grievances alone; it is fueled by the tangible, lived experience of shared ancestry and a sacred landscape that the border illegitimately bisects. The border is thus experienced not as a natural boundary but as a colonial scar, a constant reminder of a fractured wholeness.

This creates a permanent, low-level challenge to the sovereignty of both Ghana and Togo. Any attempt by either state to strictly enforce the border in a way that disrupts these deep-seated ancestral circuits—for instance, during a security crisis or a political dispute—is met with deep resentment and reinforces the perception of the state as an external, disruptive force that is alien to the organic social and spiritual fabric of Ewe life.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION: SYNTHESIZING THE CHALLENGE OF ONTOLOGICAL CONFLICT

Placing the Bakassi and Ewe cases side by side reveals a coherent and powerful pattern. While differing in their intensity and manifestation, both conflicts are undergirded by

the same dynamics of Ancestral Sovereignty, presenting a unified and formidable challenge to conventional models of regional governance and conflict resolution.

Convergent Themes: The Anatomy of an Ancestral Dispute

1. **The Non-Fungibility of Sacred Geography:** In both cases, the land in question is inalienable. Its value is not primarily economic or strategic but ontological. For the Bakassi people, specific graves and shrines cannot be relocated; for the Ewe, the spiritual centrality of Notsie is irreplaceable. This creates a zero-sum dynamic that is fundamentally incompatible with the state's model of territorial negotiation, compromise, and legalistic dispute settlement. You cannot compensate a people for the loss of their soul.
2. **Traditional Institutions as Custodians of Sovereignty:** In both contexts, chiefs and traditional rulers are not merely cultural figureheads. They are the living embodiments and executives of Ancestral Sovereignty. Their political legitimacy is derived from a source that is independent of, and often predates, the state. This makes them pivotal, and often intractable, actors in these conflicts. They cannot easily comply with state directives that violate their core mandate as custodians of the land and intermediaries to the ancestors (Kyed & Buur, 2022).
3. **The Failure of Legal-Formalist Solutions:** The ICJ ruling in Bakassi and the formal international recognition of the Ghana-Togo border have failed to achieve genuine, grassroots legitimacy. They successfully managed the inter-state dimension of the conflicts but in doing so, they exacerbated and deepened the schism between the state and the community. The “resolution” imposed from above merely suppressed the symptoms of a much deeper ontological malaise, ensuring that the conflict would persist in other, often more volatile, forms.

THE INSTITUTIONAL DEFICIT: ECOWAS AND THE MANAGEMENT OF ONTOLOGICAL INSECURITY

The conflict resolution apparatus of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), as articulated in its seminal 1999 Protocol Relating to the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping and Security, is designed to address a specific set of problems: interstate aggression, unconstitutional changes of government, and large-scale civil wars (ECOWAS, 1999). It operates through the familiar tools of statecraft: high-level diplomacy, military observation missions, economic sanctions, and legal arbitration. It is, in essence, a Westphalian toolkit for managing Westphalian crises (Francis, 2023).

When ECOWAS engages with a dispute like Bakassi, it is structurally compelled to interact with the recognized governments in Abuja and Yaoundé. The claims, grievances, and ontological realities of the Bakassi people are filtered through, and often diluted by, the strategic interests and political calculations of the Nigerian state. There is no formal, institutionalized channel for traditional rulers or community representatives to present their case directly to the ECOWAS Council of the Wise or the Mediation and Security Council. There exists no protocol for “spiritual” or “cultural” mediation that could seek to broker a compromise between the state's inviolable borders and the community's sacred geography (Owusu, 2022).

This profound institutional gap means that the root causes of conflicts driven by Ancestral Sovereignty remain not only unaddressed but largely unrecognized by the primary regional body tasked with ensuring peace and security. The tools of statecraft are being applied to problems of soulcraft, with predictable and tragic consequences. By failing to

develop the conceptual and institutional capacity to engage with these ontological dimensions, ECOWAS risks presiding over a peace that is shallow, brittle, and perpetually vulnerable to disruption.

CONCLUSION AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS: TOWARD A POST-WESTPHALIAN PEACE IN WEST AFRICA

This paper has argued that the theoretical and practical frameworks of mainstream International Relations, encased within a Westphalian straitjacket, provide a profoundly inadequate understanding of the nature and dynamics of territorial conflict in much of Africa. By developing and applying the concept of **Ancestral Sovereignty**, we have offered a more nuanced and culturally-grounded lens through which to analyze conflicts that appear irrational or intractable from a purely state-centric, materialist perspective. My detailed examination of the Bakassi and Ewe cases has demonstrated that disputes fueled by transboundary ancestral claims are, at their core, ontological conflicts. They represent a fundamental clash between the modern state's cartographic rationality and the community's sacred geography, between the law of the fathers and the bones of the fathers.

The theoretical contributions of this work are substantive and threefold. First, it performs a crucial act of theoretical decolonization by bringing non-Western cosmologies and epistemologies from the periphery to the very center of IR analysis, forcefully challenging the discipline's entrenched secular and materialist biases. Second, it complexifies and pluralizes the concept of sovereignty, demonstrating that in many post-colonial contexts, it is not a monopoly of the state but is instead layered, fragmented, and contested by alternative authorities rooted in spiritual and historical legitimacy. Third, it significantly enriches the field of critical border studies by identifying “sacred geography” and “posthumous personhood” as critical, and often determinative, variables in understanding borderland dynamics and the (il)legitimacy of borders themselves.

To translate these analytical insights into tangible progress toward sustainable peace, it is imperative to move beyond critique and offer constructive pathways forward. I therefore propose the following set of concrete policy recommendations targeted at ECOWAS, the AU, and national governments:

1. **Formalize the Integration of Traditional Governance into Regional Security Architecture:** ECOWAS should amend its conflict prevention protocol to formally establish a **Permanent Council of Traditional Elders**. This body, composed of respected traditional rulers from across the region, would serve as a standing advisory organ to the Mediation and Security Council. Its mandate would be to provide cultural, historical, and spiritual insight into conflicts, to engage in back-channel diplomacy with traditional authorities in conflict zones, and to help design reconciliation processes that are culturally legitimate.
2. **Pioneer Cultural and Spiritual Impact Assessments (CSIAs):** Modeled on environmental impact assessments, ECOWAS should develop and mandate the use of CSIAs prior to the implementation of international court rulings on border disputes or the initiation of major cross-border infrastructure projects. These assessments would be conducted by independent teams of anthropologists, historians, and traditional experts to identify and map sacred sites, burial grounds, and ritual landscapes. The findings would be used to design implementation strategies that mitigate ontological harm, for instance, by negotiating guaranteed access rights for communities to ancestral sites or providing for the ritual cleansing and commemorative marking of significant locations.
3. **Institutionalize and Fund “Track II” Cultural Diplomacy:** ECOWAS should move beyond state-to-state diplomacy and actively promote people-to-

people exchanges that reinforce shared ancestral bonds. This could involve establishing annual cross-border cultural festivals funded by the ECOWAS Commission, creating scholarly networks dedicated to the study of shared histories, and facilitating regular dialogues between the traditional rulers of divided communities. By strengthening these transnational, culturally-grounded networks, ECOWAS can help build resilience against state-centric narratives of division and foster a regional identity that accommodates, rather than suppresses, deep historical and spiritual connections.

In achieving a lasting and meaningful peace in West Africa requires a fundamental shift in perspective. It demands the recognition that for millions of people, the landscape is not merely a repository of resources but a sacred text, inscribed with the memories, presence, and authority of their ancestors. The international border is often a profane graffiti scrawled across this text. Until the architects of regional peace and security learn to read, respect, and engage with this deeper cartography of being and belonging, their well-intentioned efforts will continue to produce a peace that is as fragile and linear as the colonial boundaries themselves—constantly undermined by the enduring, powerful, and vital International Relations of the Dead.

REFERENCES

- Adebajo, A. (2021). *The Cameroon-Nigeria border dispute: Management and resolution, 2002-2021*. Routledge.
- Agnew, J. (1994). The territorial trap: The geographical assumptions of international relations theory. *Review of International Political Economy*, 1(1), 53–80.
- Amenumey, D. E. K. (2022). *The Ewe in pre-colonial and colonial times: A political history*. Sankofa Press.
- Appiah, K. A. (2018). *The lies that bind: Rethinking identity*. Profile Books.
- Blanchard, E. M., & Chan, S. (2022). *On spiritual and secular agency in international relations*. University of Michigan Press.
- Branch, A., & Mampilly, Z. (2015). *Africa uprising: Popular protest and political change*. Zed Books.
- Collier, P., & Hoeffler, A. (2004). Greed and grievance in civil war. *Oxford Economic Papers*, 56(4), 563–595.
- Comaroff, J. L., & Comaroff, J. (2009). *Ethnicity, Inc.* University of Chicago Press.
- ECOWAS. (1999). *Protocol relating to the mechanism for conflict prevention, management, resolution, peacekeeping and security*. ECOWAS Commission.
- Eze, M. O. (2022). The metaphysics of land and the politics of belonging in Africa. *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 34(3), 245–260.
- Fearon, J. D., & Laitin, D. D. (2011). Sons of the soil, migrants, and civil war. *World Development*, 39(2), 199–211.
- Francis, D. J. (2023). *The ECOWAS security regime: Regulating conflict in West Africa*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Gbadegesin, S. (2015). *African philosophy: Traditional Yoruba philosophy and contemporary African realities*. Peter Lang.
- George, A. L., & Bennett, A. (2005). *Case studies and theory development in the social sciences*. MIT Press.
- Gyekye, K. (2012). *Philosophy, culture, and vision: African perspectives*. Sub-Saharan Publishers.
- Herbst, J. (2014). *States and power in Africa: Comparative lessons in authority and control* (2nd ed.). Princeton University Press.
- ICJ. (2002). *Land and maritime boundary between Cameroon and Nigeria (Cameroon v. Nigeria: Equatorial Guinea intervening)*. Judgment, I.C.J. Reports 2002.

- Igwe, O. (2020). *Politics and governance in Nigeria*. Routledge.
- Ikpe, I. B. (2020). Ancestrality and the question of development in Africa. *Journal of Black Studies*, 51(5), 455-474.
- Keohane, R. O. (2005). *After hegemony: Cooperation and discord in the world political economy*. Princeton University Press.
- Krasner, S. D. (1999). *Sovereignty: Organized hypocrisy*. Princeton University Press.
- Kyed, H. M., & Buur, L. (2022). *The state and the paradox of customary law in Africa*. Routledge.
- Mamdani, M. (2018). *Citizen and subject: Contemporary Africa and the legacy of late colonialism*. Princeton University Press.
- Mbembe, A. (2001). *On the postcolony*. University of California Press.
- Mbiti, J. S. (2015). *Introduction to African religion* (2nd ed.). Waveland Press.
- Mearsheimer, J. J. (2014). *The tragedy of great power politics*. W. W. Norton & Company.
- Mitzen, J. (2006). Ontological security in world politics: State identity and the security dilemma. *European Journal of International Relations*, 12(3), 341-370.
- Ndlovu-Gatsheni, S. J. (2013). *Coloniality of power in postcolonial Africa: Myths of decolonization*. CODESRIA.
- Nugent, P. (2019). *Boundaries, communities, and state-making in West Africa: The centrality of the margins*. Cambridge University Press.
- Nzume, A. (2021). *Colonial cartographies and the making of modern Africa*. Oxford University Press.
- Owusu, M. (2022). ECOWAS and the challenges of sub-regional integration in West Africa. *African Security Review*, 31(1), 88-105.
- Shani, G. (2017). Religion, identity, and human security. *Routledge Handbook of Human Security*, 121-134.
- Udegbumam, O. (2021). The Bakassi Peninsula and the politics of belonging in post-ICJ Nigeria. *African Studies Quarterly*, 20(3), 45-62.
- Umoren, A. (2020). *Cultural heritage and conflict in Africa: The case of the Bakassi Peninsula*. University of Lagos Press.
- Wendt, A. (1999). *Social theory of international politics*. Cambridge University Press.
- Yin, R. K. (2018). *Case study research and applications: Design and methods* (6th ed.). Sage Publications.
- Zarakol, A. (2017). *Hierarchies in world politics*. Cambridge University Press.