

Revisiting Border Issues in Africa — a reflection on the border of the French colony Upper Volta —

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Abstract

This paper is intended to review the border-related history and challenges in African countries by examining the case of former Burkina Faso (former Upper Volta), which has endured quite complicated border disputes with neighboring countries since its independence. At independence, most African countries inherited colonial borders that had been demarcated by European empires since the late 19th century. Even almost half a century later, the border-originated issues of African countries continue to cause conflict in political, economic, social, and international relations, which are closely connected with security concerns, such as conflict, ethnic division, refugees, or smuggling. This paper revisits the origin of border issues in Burkina Faso (Upper Volta) by referring to archival documents of the French colonial government. On the one hand, borderland regions in African countries have attracted attention worldwide in recent years as locations for armed forces activities by jihadist groups, such as Al Shabab or Boko Haram. On the other hand, borders are recognized for providing opportunities to advance economic and political cooperation and regional integration in the 21st century. The African Union expects the borders to transform “from barriers to bridges” among African countries and promote international cooperation in the borderlands. This paper seeks to clarify the historical challenges and potentials of African borders.

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It came into being in 1919 but was then abolished in 1932, and again reconstituted by a law of 4 September 1947, which stated that the boundaries of “the re-established territory of Upper Volta” were to be “those of the former colony of Upper Volta on 5 September 1932,”... In the present case, therefore, the problem is to ascertain what frontier was inherited from the French administration; more precisely, to ascertain what, in the disputed area, was the frontier which existed in 1959-1960 between the *territoires d’outre-mer* of Sudan and Upper Volta. (International Court of Justice 1986c, 6)

1. Introduction

This paper is intended to examine the origin of border issues that have raised concerns and caused discord in African politics and international relations since the independence of African countries.

The final border beacon (*la borne* in French) for territorial delimitation between Burkina Faso (former Upper Volta) and Mali was established in 2010. An inaugural ceremony took place among representatives of both governments. After long, tough negotiations involving the Organization of African Unity (OAU, founded in 1963 and reformed into the African Union [AU] in 2002), the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), and especially accepting the 1986 judgment of the International Court of Justice (ICJ), both countries eventually agreed on the delimitation of their border. Thus, the border disputes between the governments of Burkina Faso and Mali were peacefully resolved 50 years after the countries attained independence.

Burkina Faso and Mali had fought two wars over the border—the first in 1974 and the second in 1985. In the 1974 war, the name of a young soldier, future revolutionary leader Thomas Sankara, was spread widely in Upper Volta (the name Burkina Faso was adopted in 1984) in narrating how bravely he had fought to enter Malian territory (Jaffré 1997, 92). This war made Sankara famous among the Voltaic people (the people of Upper Volta have been called Burkinabe since 1984). This war provided young military leaders with an opportunity to join in the political game and finally establish their revolutionary regime (1983–87) in Upper Volta (Burkina Faso), led by Sankara with Blaise Compaoré¹ and other young comrades.

The independence of African countries generated political and diplomatic

1. After 27 years of authoritarian rule, Compaoré resigned at the end of October 2014 after the immensely popular insurgency caused by a protest movement against his attempt at a constitutional change to remove presidential term limits.

disputes domestically and internationally over sovereign borders, as newly sovereign African states retained their colonial borders. Although territorial borders had been delimited or imposed by European empires to rule their colonies, African countries were unable to show more “authentic” borders as alternative, more legitimate ones. Thus, the OAU recognized the principle of respect for the current (inherited) borders in 1964.²

The AU subsequently inherited the principle of maintaining the status quo of national borders from the OAU. Under this principle, African states have tried to resolve domestic and international disputes derived from border problems. Since independence, international border disputes have rarely brought about inter-state wars between African national armies. Yet internally, many African states have faced rebel struggles, such as separatist movements in Katanga (DR Congo), Cabinda (Angola), and Casamance (Senegal) or those seeking the reunification of compatriot groups divided by the imposition of colonial borders, such as the Great Somali movement (spreading over Somalia, Djibouti, Ethiopia, and Kenya) and Ewe unification movement (Ghana and Togo). Eritrea (1993) and South Sudan (2011) achieved independence after long and painful armed struggles.

After a referendum in January 2011, South Sudan gained independence from Sudan in July of that year. This most recent independence event in Africa was recognized in the international community. However, South Sudan’s independence has also been considered Pandora’s box. This modification of the border encouraged separatist movements from which many African countries have suffered. From this perspective, South Sudan’s independence is not simply a domestic issue in a specific country but might affect the destinies of all African states.

In general, armed conflicts or civil wars occur once inside a country and occasionally expand to neighboring countries, but cases of inter-state war between African states’ national armies derived from border disputes, such as the Uganda–Tanzania war in 1978–79, have been rare. In addition, the two wars (in 1974 and 1985) between the national armies of Burkina Faso (Upper Volta) and Mali due to their border disputes are not recognized as typical armed conflicts in postcolonial African history.

This paper revisits the origin of border issues, which have threatened national and regional security in African countries, by focusing on the French colony of Upper Volta as a case study. Newly independent African countries had to inherit

2. The OAU’s 1964 resolution (AHG/16/1) determined incumbent national borders among African countries. The OAU charter recognized respect for the actual sovereignty and territory of African countries (Touval 1972, 42,86).

their colonial borders and territories. However, the situation has been more complicated for Upper Volta (Burkina Faso) because it was first established as a French colonial administrative unit (*circonscription administrative*) under *Afrique occidentale française* (AOF, French West Africa) in 1919, then was abolished in 1932, was reestablished in 1947, and subsequently achieved independence in 1960. At the time when this colony unit was reestablished, some parts of the colonial administrative borders were vague and remained so until the day of independence. This unelaborate transition of the colonial administrative unit in the French colony made the border issue of Upper Volta (Burkina Faso) more complicated and controversial with neighboring countries after its independence.

Although this paper neither concludes nor generalizes Africa's border issues through these case studies, it contributes some essential understandings of the border-originated challenges among African countries.

2. Colonial and contemporary border disputes in Africa

Globalization is perceived as a fundamental feature of the contemporary world. People, capital, information, and infectious disease have been crossing sovereign borders rapidly and in large quantities. Although globalization has progressed, sovereign borders never disappear and sustain their significant influence over people's lives. The COVID-19 pandemic has mercilessly locked us within sovereign borders.

Borders are likely to create "outsiders," and not only in the geographical sense. Borders have influenced and edified communities' and individuals' identities and have constituted the base of political conflict. The demarcation of borders is part of the sovereign state formation process. However, European countries drew extremely artificial borders in Africa after the Berlin Conference of 1885 without respecting the interests and histories of (political) communities of African people.

Colonial borders became sovereign, international borders among African states on their first day of independence. Thus, the border issue is old but constantly renewed for African states even six decades after their independence. Borders have affected territorial disputes and armed conflicts, national security, refugee issues, regional integration, sovereignty, smuggling, and trade disputes. However, newly independent African states have maintained the status quo and have been reluctant to discuss border modifications.

Even in the absence of physical conflict (though not necessarily during peaceful periods), the border issue is always very sensitive in relation to the activities of

anti-government rebel forces or smugglers.

The African states have recognized that modifying state borders might open Pandora's box and lead to their fragmentation (Touval 1972, 83). In the early 1960s, the demand for Eritrea's independence from Ethiopia divided African countries into two camps: the Casablanca Group and the Monrovia Group. The OAU called on African countries to respect the "inherited" borders from former European colonies.

Sovereign borders had existed among African states in pre-colonial times as well. The continent has a long history of numerous kingdoms and chieftaincies being established and perishing with accompanying border modifications. However, the governing authorities did not necessarily draw hard geographical borders. Consequently, the rule in a peripheral region would become ambiguous in the traditional African states. In African history, massive numbers of people or ethnic groups repeatedly crossed sovereign borders, for example, to escape tyranny (Herbst 2000, 88).

Two categories can be distinguished in terms of the approach to delimiting colonial borders. The first category includes borders rectified by agreements among European colonial forces. Thus, the borders were international borders between European colonies. The second category includes borders rectified inside a colony (Touval 1972, 4). In other words, colonies contained domestic and administrative borders. The colonial borders divided ethnic groups and living areas and created new identities and interests among African people (Nugent 2002, 273).

3. Origin of border issues in Upper Volta (Burkina Faso)

3-1. Establishment and reformation of Upper Volta

Despite repeated contestations and dissatisfaction with the colonial borders, newly independent African states had to inherit these borders because they could not present more legitimate sovereign borders. Upper Volta (Burkina Faso since 1984) experienced this typical process, but its border circumstances were more complicated than those of other African countries because of its particular colonial experience.

The Upper Volta colony was established in 1919, then abolished in 1932, and eventually reestablished in 1947 by the French government. During its abolition period, the former Upper Volta territory was divided into three parts. These territories were then absorbed into three different neighboring French colonies by 1947:

Côte d'Ivoire, French Sudan (*Soudan français*, currently Mali), and Niger. Thus, the border situation of Upper Volta complicated its relationships with neighboring countries just after the country attained independence.

After the conquest against African chieftaincies' resistance, in 1895, the French colonial authority had established the AOF comprising Senegal, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, and French Sudan. The AOF was then restructured by adding Dahomey, Upper Volta, Mauritania, and Niger.

The AOF tried to establish its administrative structure and fix the colonial administrative borders of Upper Volta with neighboring colonies.³ However, at the beginning of the 20th century, the colonial administrative unit and the AOF's borders were frequently modified. For instance, the Tera region was transferred from the Upper Volta colony to the Niger colony in 1927.⁴

The Fada N'Gourma region (southeastern part of Upper Volta) was transferred from the Dahomey colony to the Senegal-Niger colony before the Upper Volta colony was established.⁵ The AOF reported to the French metropolitan government that the Fada *cercle* (similar to a prefectural administrative structure) and a part of the Kandi *cercle* were transferred from the Dahomey colony to the Senegal-Niger colony. This was because the people of Fada N'Gourma were a closer ethnic group to the Mossi and did not have a common culture with the Baliba people of Dahomey. Rivers did not necessarily separate the inhabited territories of ethnic groups clearly; the same ethnic groups usually lived on both sides of the river. A report

3. A report on northern Upper Volta laid out the modification of military territory borders and establishment of the Bandiagara, Sumpi, and Ouahigouya cercles. Gouvernement général de l'Afrique Occidentale Française, "Le délégué permanent du Gouverneur Général à Monsieur le Gouverneur Général de l'Afrique Occidentale Française" [General government of the AOF, "The permanent delegate of the Governor-General to Mr. Governor-General of French West Africa"], Saint-Louis, December 26, 1902. Archives nationales d'outre-mer [National Overseas Archives, ANOM], Aix-en-Provence, France. A report on villages located across the border between the Dori and Fada cercles. Gouverneur Général de l'Afrique Occidentale Française au Ministre des Colonies, "Rectification de frontière entre les résidences du Dori (1^{er} territoire militaire) et de Fada N'Gourma (Dahomey)" [Governor-General of French West Africa to the Minister of Colonies, "Rectification of the border between the residences of Dori <1st military territory> and Fada N'Gourma <Dahomey>"], Saint Louis, August 7, 1901. ANOM.

4. Lettre confidentielle au inspecteur général des colonies [Confidential letter to the inspector general of the colonies], January 23, 1947. (Centre national des archives du Burkina Faso [National Center of Archives of Burkina Faso, CNA-BF])

5. "Décret portant modification de la limite du Haut-Sénégal-Niger et du Dahomey" ["Decree of the modification of the boundary of Haut-Senegal-Niger and Dahomey"], April 23, 1913. ANOM. "Rapport au Président de la république française suivi d'un décret portant modification de la limite du Haut-Sénégal-Niger et du Dahomey" ["Report to the President of the French Republic followed by a decree modifying the boundary of Haut-Senegal-Niger and Dahomey"], April 23, 1913. ANOM.

presented that the French colonial authority tried to focus on categorizing Indigenous peoples' living areas rather than distinguishing geographical landmarks.⁶

The government ordinance of March 2, 1907, modified borders between two colonies.⁷ The AOF indicated the necessity of considering people living in the inter-colony border area. The presidential ordinance officialized this decision. However, this modification of borders and territories remained ambiguous in the colonial territories and repeatedly caused border disputes between Dahomey (Benin) and Upper Volta (Burkina Faso) after their independence.

The colonial government recognized the Gourmantché as a neighboring ethnic group of the Mossi people, although they did not belong to the same ethnic group or the same political community. A colonial officer reported that the chief of Bilanga had to belong to the N'Gourma cercle for fixing the Mossi and Ngourmas resident regions because the chief of Bilanga was under the King of Gourma's influence.⁸

Figure 1: Colonial border between the Dahomey and French Sudan colonies under the AOF



Source: Première direction, Bureau de l'Afrique, "Soudan Française: Projet de délimitation des territoires de la Boucle du Niger entre les colonies du Dahomey et du Soudan Français" [First Direction, Africa Office, "French Sudan: Project of Delimitation of the Territories of the Niger Loop between the Colonies of Dahomey and French Sudan"], September 16, 1898. ANOM.

6. Gouvernement Général de l'Afrique Occidentale Française, "Rapport en conseil de gouvernement" [General Government of French West Africa, "Report to the Council of Government"], December 13, 1906. ANOM.

7. "Décret portant modification de la limite du Haut-Sénégal-Niger et du Dahomey" ["Decree modifying the boundary of Haut-Senegal-Niger and Dahomey"], April 23, 1907. ANOM.

8. Soudan Français, "Projet de la délimitation des territoires de la Boucle du Niger entre les

The Upper Volta colony in the AOF was established in 1919 under suspicion regarding the economic gain for France from this new colony. After its establishment, its cercle units were reviewed. Within the next 10 years, many of these cercles were restructured and de facto downgraded into subdivisions (a lower administrative unit). Certain subdivisions were subsequently abolished. For example, the Leo subdivision was abolished and transferred under the Pô subdivision.⁹ The Yako subdivision was abolished and transferred under the Koudougou subdivision.¹⁰ The Diapaga subdivision was removed and transferred under the Fada cercle. The most crucial measure was the abolition of the military post in Bobo-Dioulasso cercle in 1929.¹¹ The AOF downgraded Upper Volta's position in the colonial structure and then prepared to abolish the colony a decade after its establishment.

3-2. Abolition and reestablishment of Upper Volta

Thus, the Upper Volta colony was first abolished by the presidential ordinance (Décret) of September 1932. Its territory was divided and absorbed into three neighboring AOF colonies.¹² The Fada and Dori cercles (268,000 persons) were transferred to the Niger colony. The Ouahigouya cercle and regions on the Volta River's left side (a part of the Dedougou cercle; 712,000 persons) were transferred to the French Sudan colony. The most populated and more crucial regions of Upper Volta, such as the Batié, Bobo-Dioulasso, Gaoua, Kaya, Koudougou, Ouagadougou, and Tenkodogo cercles and another part of the Dedougou cercle (2,019,000 persons), were transferred to the Côte d'Ivoire colony (Skinner 1964, 173) and then reclassified as the sub-region of northern Côte d'Ivoire in July 1937.

After Upper Volta's abolition, colonial administrative institutions, like the

colonies du Dahomey et du Soudan Français" [French Sudan, "Project for the delimitation of the territories of the Niger loop between the colonies of Dahomey and French Sudan"], September 8, 1898. ANOM.

9. "Arreté No. 53," Administrateur en chef des colonies lieutenant-gouverneur P.I. de Haute-Volta ["Ordinance No. 53," Chief Colonial Administrator P.I. Lieutenant-Governor of Upper Volta], March 20, 1929. CNA-BF.

10. "Arreté No. 70," Administrateur en chef des colonies lieutenant-gouverneur P.I. de Haute-Volta ["Ordinance No. 70," Chief Colonial Administrator P.I. Lieutenant-Governor of Upper Volta], April 6, 1929. CNA-BF.

11. Gouverneur général de AOF. "Arreté Portant la suppression du poste militaire définitif de Hound (cercle de Bobo-Dioulasso)" [Governor-General of the AOF, "Ordinance relating the abolition of the final military post of Hound, Cercle of Bobo-Dioulasso"], April 18, 1929. CNA-BF.

12. Décret du 5 septembre 1932, "Portant suppression de la colonie de la Haute-Volta et répartition entre les colonies du Niger, du Soudan et de la Côte d'Ivoire" [Decree of September 5, 1932, "Relating the abolition of the colony of the Upper Volta and distributing it among the colonies of Niger, Sudan and Côte d'Ivoire"]. ANOM.

military and postal headquarters, were removed from the former Upper Volta colony.¹³ According to an AOF report, the Upper Volta colony had not been economically profitable for France since its establishment in 1919.¹⁴ The AOF governor's report addressing the Minister of Colony recommended reforming the AOF structure by abolishing Upper Volta. At that time, the Mauritania colony became economically more attractive than Upper Volta to France.¹⁵

The Governor of the Côte d'Ivoire colony reported to the Governor-General of the AOF (located in Dakar) that the cost of keeping the Upper Volta colony was "unreasonably expensive" for the French government given its small economic benefits and recommended its abolition as a realistic reform in April 1932. The Chamber of Commerce of the AOF reported in June 1932 that it would not face any problems with Upper Volta's abolition. An economic division reported that Ouahigouya and the northern part were transferred to French Sudan because of pasturage activities. The French media also reported that Upper Volta had contributed little to the colonial economy.¹⁶ Thus, the Upper Volta colony's establishment was due to a more political reason than an economic one. Its reestablishment 15 years after its abolition continued to raise political issues even after its independence.

The abolition period of the Upper Volta colony (1932–47) was significant in that it saw delayed infrastructure development in the territory. Given this situation, the Voltaic people, especially traditional Mossi chiefs, were greatly concerned about decreasing their presence in the French colony. Consequently, after World War II, Mossi chiefs, especially the supreme Mossi chief Moro Naba (of Ouagadougou), strengthened the requirements placed on the colonial government for reestablishing Upper Volta.¹⁷

In particular, Moro Naba claimed that a modification of electoral law would

13. Gouvernement général de l'AOF, "Note pour le directeur général des services économiques" [General Government of the AOF, "Note for the Director-General of Economic Services"], September 24, 1932. CNA-BF.

14. Lettre du Lieutenant-Gouverneur de la Côte d'Ivoire au Gouverneur Général, "Rémaniements territoriaux Haute Volta," [Letter from the Lieutenant-Governor of Côte d'Ivoire to the Governor General, "Territorial Changes of Upper Volta"], April 19, 1932. CNA-BF.

15. Gouverneur général de l'AOF à Monsieur le Ministre des Colonies, "Réorganisation territoriale des colonies de l'AOF" [From Governor-General of the AOF to Minister of Colony, "Territorial Reorganization of colonies of the AOF"], April 7, 1932. CNA-BF.

16. *1er Nouvelle*, June 28, 1932. CNA-BF.

17. Lettre du Moro-Naba, Empereur des Mossi à M. G. Bidault, Président du Conseil [Letter from Moro-Naba, Emperor of the Mossi to Mr. G. Bidault, President of the Council], September 4, 1946. ANS.

reduce his region's political power. Furthermore, the railway construction project at Bobo-Dioulasso (from Abidjan) had been suspended for over 10 years. The colonial government's promise to extend the railway to Ouagadougou had yet to be carried out. Moro Naba understood that this delay was due to the abolition of the Upper Volta colony, which downgraded its status in the colonial structure. Moro Naba established the *Union Voltaïque* (Voltaic Union) in March 1946 calling on the French government to reestablish the Upper Volta colony by separating it from northern Côte d'Ivoire. The Voltaic Union elected Moro Naba as the honorable president.¹⁸

At this moment, France worried that Moro Naba would approach the British colonial authority owing to his dissatisfaction with the abolition of the Upper Volta colony. Indeed, Moro Naba did receive a British delegation. Consequently, the AOF reported concern about Moro Naba's sympathy for the British colonial administration.¹⁹

France also worried about the increasing power of Ivoirian political leaders, especially Félix Houphouët-Boigny, and began to consider reestablishing Upper Volta to reduce his influence in the French colony (Skinner 1964, 183). However, France did not find a particular economic interest in upgrading Upper Volta to a colony again. In fact, France expected that it would cost (financial and human resources) more if the Upper Volta colony was reestablished. The sole interest of France was to supply labor sources from the (former) Upper Volta territory to the AOF territories. The French government expected that Upper Volta's abolition would facilitate the delivery of Mossi laborers throughout the AOF territory. Houphouët-Boigny, a deputy member of the French National Assembly, elected from the Côte d'Ivoire constituency (an overseas territory or colony), and future minister of the French government and then President of Côte d'Ivoire, supported the reestablishment of Upper Volta. As is frequently mentioned in archival documents, the French government paid close attention to Houphouët-Boigny's reaction to this issue.²⁰

18. Lettre confidentiale de l'administrateur des colonies au directeur général des affaires politiques, administratives et sociales de l'AOF [Confidential letter from the administrator of the colonies to the Director-General of political, administrative, and social affairs of the AOF], June 21, 1946. CNA-BF.

19. Secret telegram from the AOF, "Action anglaise sur le Moro Naba" ["British action on the Moro Naba"], June 20, 1946. CAN-BF.

20. Lettre confidentiel du Gouverneur général de l'AOF au Ministre de l'Outre-Mer [Confidential Letter from Governor-General of the AOF to Minister of Oversea Territory (Colony)], July 1946. CNA-BF.

This was an influential factor of the reestablishment of Upper Volta. Houphouët-Boigny also anticipated that it would be challenging to win as much support for his election from the Voltaic people as from the Ivoirians if former Upper Volta regions remained within the Côte d'Ivoire colony. Moro Naba repeated and escalated his demand for the reestablishment of Upper Volta and also called on the non-Mossi chiefs of Ouahigouya (the colony of French Sudan)²¹ and Fada N'Gourma (the colony of Niger) to work together for the reestablishment of the Upper Volta colony²² to escape dependence on the Côte d'Ivoire colony. Moro Naba needed the reestablishment of Upper Volta to send a deputy from the colony to Paris to champion Upper Volta's interests.²³

A report on Upper Volta's reestablishment mentioned that reason for its abolition in 1932 was to provide a labor force to the Côte d'Ivoire and Niger colonies. It also mentioned the political reason for the reestablishment in 1947 that Ivoirian politicians, especially Houphouët-Boigny, preferred the separation of Upper Volta from the Côte d'Ivoire colony because of Houphouët-Boigny's election to the French National Assembly. Therefore, Upper Volta's reestablishment would not affect plantation owners (including himself) insofar as the labor force from Upper Volta was assured. This report was particularly concerned about the Fada cercle in Upper Volta, as the Fada region would be isolated in the reestablished Upper Volta colony after its return from the Niger colony.²⁴

4. Border disputes between Upper Volta (Burkina Faso) and Mali

4-1. Historical overview of border disputes

Although Upper Volta (Burkina Faso since 1984) and Mali held countless meetings and dialogues aimed at resolving border disputes after their independence, the two countries fought two wars, as stated, in 1974 and 1985. The border and territorial

21. Rapport confidentiel du Commandant de cercle de Ouahigouya p.i. au Gouverneur du Soudan Français [Confidential report from the Commandant of the Circle of Ouahigouya p.i. to the Governor of French Sudan], July 21, 1946. Archives national du Sénégal [National Archives of Senegal] (ANS).

22. Letter from Moro-Naba to Mr. G. Bidault (September 4, 1946, Ouagadougou). CNA-BF.

23. Note sur la reconstitution éventuelle de la colonie de la Haute Volta, Direction Générale des affaires politiques, administratives, et sociales de l'AOF [Note on the reestablishment of the Colony of the Upper Volta, Direction-General of Political, Administrative, and Social Affairs of the AOF], January 30, 1947. CNA-BF.

24. *Ibid.*

disputes between the neighboring countries worsened and became increasingly complicated through the arbitral abolition (1932–1947) and the reestablishment of the Upper Volta colony by the French government.²⁵

Consequently, Upper Volta and Mali had different ideas about the location of the sovereign border between the two countries. Through the bitter experiences of the two wars, Upper Volta (Burkina Faso) and Mali sued each other in the ICJ for violating the border. Border disputes damaged diplomatic relations and brought severe problems over economic activities for both landlocked countries. During the ICJ's judicial process, each country tried to verify the details of the border dispute to identify a solution.

The two states have a common frontier of 1,380 kilometres according to Burkina Faso and 1,297 kilometres according to Mali, of which almost 900 kilometres according to Burkina Faso and almost 1,022 kilometres according to Mali have been successfully delimited by agreement between the Parties. The disputed area is defined by the Special Agreement as “a band of territory extending from the sector Koro (Mali) Djibo (Upper Volta) up to and including the region of the Béli”. The Béli is the largest of the temporary watercourses in the region. It originates in the eastern slopes of the Hombori mountains and flows to the south-east before joining the Niger river outside the disputed area. (ICJ 1986d, 12)

According to the above-quoted ICJ report, the two countries were in agreement about roughly 70% of the border's delimitations. The border areas between the two countries were broadly located in pastoral areas with a Sahelian climate. In general, nomadic people would move and frequently cross the border to seek water and grass for their livestock. Water has been a truly precious natural resource in such a drought-prone region. The severe natural conditions complicated border negotiations owing to the issue of nomadic people's water management and their affiliation to either government.

The most contentious border region was located in the northeastern region of Upper Volta, which had been ruled under the French Sudan colony during the abolition period (1932–47).²⁶ People moved into the new colony unit, settled their

25. Loi N° 47-1707 du 4 septembre 1947, tendant rétablissement du territoire de la Haute Volta [Law No. 47-1707 of September 4, 1947, tending to reestablish the territory of Upper Volta]. CNA-BF.

26. The ICJ reported, “Order No. 2728 AP issued on 27 November 1935 by the

villages, and developed their agro-pastoral activities in the former border area between French colonies. The abolition of Upper Volta made the border dispute between the two countries significantly more complicated after their independence.²⁷

Therefore, the border question was complicatedly intertwined with questions of affiliations of villages, populations, and economic activities in the borderland.

Upper Volta was reconstituted in 1947 by the law 47-1707 of 4 September 1947, which rescinded outright the decree of 5 September 1932 that had abolished the colony of Upper Volta, and stated that the boundaries of “the re-established territory of Upper Volta” were to be “those of the former colony of Upper Volta on 5 September 1932”. It was this reconstituted Upper Volta which subsequently obtained independence on 5 August 1960, and took the name of Burkina Faso in 1984. (ICJ 1986d, 19)

Although the law related to the reestablishment of the Upper Volta colony (1947) stipulated that the borders before the abolition in 1932 be readopted, the vague management of the territories and borders during the 15-year abolition period and the 13-year period from Upper Volta’s reestablishment to its independence made issues more complicated between the two independent countries.²⁸ During the

Governor-General ad interim of French West Africa for the delimitation of the cercles of Bafoulabé, Bamako and Mopti (French Sudan). The last-named cercle bordered on the cercle of Ouahigouya, which was then a part of French Sudan and which reverted to Upper Volta as from 1947.... The text describes the eastern boundary of the Sudanese cercle of Mopti as being “a line running markedly north-east, leaving to the cercle of Mopti the villages of Yoro, Dioulouna, Oukoulou, Agoulourou, Koubo...” (ICJ 1986c, 10).

27. The ICJ reported, “In its Memorial, Burkina Faso divided the disputed frontier into two sectors: the western part, described as the sector of the ‘four villages’, and the eastern sector, extending from the point with the co-ordinates 1°24’15” W and 14°43’45” N as far as the heights of N’Gouma. In its *submissions* however, throughout the proceedings, it divided the line it proposed into two sectors in relation to a different point (geographical co-ordinates 0°40’47” W and 15°00’03” N); the Chamber will consider later what significance is to be attached to this point. For Mali, the disputed region can also be divided into two sectors: one extending from the village of Yoro to the pool of Kétiouaire, for which, according to Mali, a fairly precise delimitation exists, and the other from the pool of Kétiouaire to the heights of N’Gouma and the Kabia ford. In its *Counter-Memorial*, Burkina Faso preferred to adopt a division of the frontier into three sectors: the first from Dionouga to the point with the co-ordinates 1°24’15” W and 14°43’45” N (the region of the four villages), the second from the former point to mount Tabakarach (the Soum region), and the third from mount Tabakarach to the tripoint” (ICJ 1986d, 38).

28. The ICJ reported, “To the south (from point Y to point Z), what in 1935 was the boundary between French Sudan and Niger was transformed in 1947, owing to the reincorporation of the *canton* of Aribinda and the Niger *cercle* of Dori into the restored colony of Upper Volta, into a mere

abolition period, borders and border-related issues among colonial administrative units became issues between the French Sudan and Niger colonies.²⁹

A map is an essential material for border negotiations.³⁰ One factor that

administrative boundary within that colony between two *cantons* of the *cercle* of Dori. To the west, between point Y and point W, what had been in 1935 merely an administrative boundary between two Sudanese *cercles* (Mopti – including Bandiagara – and Ouahigouya) became once more the frontier between French Sudan and Upper Volta.” (ICJ 1986d, 44) “In chronological order, the next regulative text that has to be mentioned is the decree of 5 September 1932, one of whose effects was the outright abrogation of the decree of 1 March 1919 which had created the colony of Upper Volta, and hence the abolition of that colony. The new decree, which came into force on 1 January 1933, also provided as follows: ‘Art.2 – The *cercles* of Fada and Dori (except the *canton* of Aribinda) are annexed to the colony of Niger. The *cercle* of Ouahigouya, the *canton* of Aribinda within the *cercle* of Dori and that part of the *cercle* of Dedougou located on the left bank of the Black Volta are annexed to the colony of French Sudan...’ By an Order of the Governor-General of French West Africa dated 17 November 1932, *the territories* of the colony of Upper Volta which had been annexed to French Sudan by the above-mentioned decree were reorganized as follows: ‘1. The *cercle* of Ouahigouya, at present forming part of Upper Volta, and the *canton* of Aribinda, detached from the *cercle* of Dori, are to form a single unit under the name of the *cercle* of Ouahigouya, with its chief town at Ouahigouya...’ This Order also came into force on 1 January 1933. It was in this administrative setting that an exchange of letters took place between the Governor-General of French West Africa and the Lieutenant-Governors of Niger and French Sudan, and this correspondence is relied upon by Burkina Faso” (ICJ 1986d, 42).

29. The ICJ reported, “*Order dated 31 August 1927*, issued by the Governor-General *ad interim* of French West Africa, relating to the boundaries of the colonies of Niger and Upper Volta; this order was amended by an *erratum dated 5 October 1927*.... They disagree, however, regarding its validity; Mali claims that the Order and the erratum are invalidated by a factual error relating to the location of the heights of N’Gouma, so that Burkina Faso may not properly rely upon them” (ICJ 1986c, 10).

30. The ICJ reported, “Two of the maps produced appear to be of special significance. These are the 1: 500,000 scale map of the colonies of French West Africa, 1925 edition, known as the Blondel la Rougery map, and the 1: 200,000 scale map of West Africa, issued by the French *Institut géographique national* (IGN) and originally published between 1958 and 1960” (ICJ 1986c, 9). “The Parties have devoted much attention to these, and Burkina Faso has referred expressly to them in its submissions. These are the 1: 500,000 scale map of the colonies of French West Africa, 1925 edition, compiled by the Geographical Service of French West Africa at Dakar and printed in Paris by Blondel la Rougery (reconnaissance map; compilation of the Hombori D 30 and Ansongo D 31 sheets); and 1: 200,000 scale map of West Africa, issued by the French Institut géographique national, which was originally published between 1958 and 1960 (Ansongo, In Tillit, Dori, Tera and Djibo sheets)” (ICJ 1986d, 34). “On 5 October 1927 an erratum to that Order was adopted, which replaced the above-quoted text with the following text: ‘The boundaries of the colonies of Niger and Upper Volta are determined as follows: “A line starting at the heights of N’Gouma, passing through the Kabia ford (astronomic point), mount Arounskoye, mount Balébanguia to the west of the ruins of the village of Tokebangou, mount Doumafende and the astronomic marker of Tong-Tong; this line then heads south-east...”’ There also exists a 1: 1,000,000 map, already mentioned, entitled ‘French West Africa: New frontier of Upper Volta and Niger (according to the erratum of 5 October 1927 to the Order dated 31 August 1927)’. Mali has laid this map before the Chamber, but observes that it contains no information as to what official body compiled it or which administrative authority approved the line shown on it” (ICJ 1986d, 39).

complicated the border negotiations between the two countries was the existence of maps made during the colonial time that showed differently demarcated borders, especially between Upper Volta and neighboring colonies ruled under the AOF. After Upper Volta and Mali gained independence, they claimed different maps for a basic understanding of the border.

4-2. Two wars and resolution between Burkina Faso (Upper Volta) and Mali

Although Burkina Faso (Upper Volta) and Mali went to war in 1974 and 1985, the two countries did attempt to resolve their border disputes through negotiations. Both wars were caused by border and territorial disputes concerning the northeastern regions of Upper Volta (southeastern regions of Mali). As soon as the two countries achieved independence, border negotiations repeatedly took place.³¹

Almost all African countries have experienced border disputes and concerns more or less with neighboring countries. Therefore, the OAU agreed with respect (no border modification attempt) of the borders inherited from the colonial administration in 1964 to avoid conflict and territorial adventures among the emerging African countries.

The essential natural border markings seasonally disappeared when the pools dried up during the drought season.³² Both countries frequently highlighted the “pool of Soum” (*mare de Soum*).³³

31. The ICJ reported, “Thus, as early as 29 November 1961, they gave institutional shape to the regular meetings already held during the colonial period between the heads of the frontier districts, by establishing a ‘mixed commission composed of the *chefs de circonscription*’. Subsequently, on 25 February 1964, they instituted a ‘joint commission’ comprising for each State a government delegate, a geographer, a topographer and the *commandants* of the frontier *cercles*, its task being to make proposals by 15 June 1964 ‘for the delimitation of the frontier on the basis of the preparatory work of the *chefs de circonscription*’. This commission was replaced by a ‘standing joint commission’ created on 8 May 1968, which comprised the Ministers of the Interior together with representatives of various ministries of both countries” (ICJ 1986d, 21).

32. Rapport confidentiel, du commandant de cercle de Deuentza au Gouverneur de la région de Mopti [Confidential report, from the Deuentza circle commander to the Governor of the Mopti region], October 6, 1970. CNA-BF.

33. The ICJ reported, “However that may be, it is obvious that the pool of Soum, situated some 24 kilometres to the east of the pool of Toussougou, requires particular examination. However, it is clear from the file that this pool, which was mentioned for the first time under this name in 1939, was thought to lie close to the meeting-point, not of the three *cercles* mentioned above of Mopti, Gourma-Rharous and Dori, but of the *cercles* of Mopti, Ouahigouya and Dori. A communication addressed by the *commandant de cercle* of Dori to the Governor of Niger on 18 December 1939 mentioned ‘the pool of Sum’ as being ‘situated on the boundary of the *subdivision* of Douentza (*cercle* of Mopti) and of the *cercle* of Ouahigouya, to which it belongs’. On 7 July 1943, the *cercle* administrator of Dori asked the *commandant de cercle* of Mopti for information concerning the position of the pool of ‘Souhoum’ and ‘the position in relation to the latter, or in relation to

According to a report on rural water resources dated 7 January 1957, produced by Burkina Faso, the pool of Soum belongs to the category of “major temporary pools which dry out in the dry season” and on 31 December of the same year, the report of a tour of inspection mentions a “large pool of Soum which dries up... in March”. The report notes that “in view of the size of their herds, the Soum herdsmen are requesting the construction of two field wells”, and this work was recommended as a “measure of the highest priority”, on the ground that “Soum is the best stockbreeding centre in the Djibo *subdivision* of the *cercle* of Ouahigouya, in Upper Volta.” (ICJ 1986d, 81)

Thus, Upper Volta and Mali recognized different disputed border areas (villages), which further complicated their negotiations and led to the first war in 1974.³⁴

The former President of Upper Volta, General Sangoulé Lamizana, noted this war against Mali in his memoir. General Lamizana was President of Upper Volta from 1966 to 1980. He noted that his country and Mali were exposed to this serious border dispute only one year after their independence. The joint border meeting had been conducted in 1961. However, just after this meeting, Malian troops invaded the territory of Upper Volta. Voltaic people were shot-killed by Malian border officers in 1962 during their return from a village (Kouna-Habe) located on the Malian side (Lamizana 1999, 299-301).

Mali’s drastic monetary policy change complicated the border issue. Mali left the CFA franc³⁵ system by establishing the Mali franc in 1962.³⁶ This affected the lives of borderland residents on both sides. At the border negotiation meeting in

the village of Kouna, of the meeting point between the *cercles* of Mopti, Ouahigouya and Dori” (ICJ 1986d, 77). “The Chamber must therefore observe that if the pool of Kébanaire or that of Kétiouaire had, between 1935 and 1939, acquired the new name of ‘pool of Soum’, it is likely that some reference to this would have appeared in an administrative document, especially in view of the fact that the pool of Kétiouaire, at least, was a sufficiently well known topographic feature in 1935 to be used in defining the end-point of a *cercle* boundary” (ICJ 1986d, 79).

34. The ICJ reported, “Following an armed conflict between the two countries which broke out on 14 December 1974, appeals were made for conciliation, notably by the head of State of Somalia, then President of the Organization of African Unity, and by the President of Senegal. On 26 December 1974, the Presidents of Upper Volta, Mali, and Togo met at Lomé and decided to set up a Mediation Commission composed of Togo, Niger, Guinea and Senegal” (ICJ 1986d, 21).

35. CFA (Communauté financière africaine/African Financial Community) was established in 1945 as the common colonial currency in the French colonies. The exchange rate between the CFA and French franc (later the Euro) was fixed at 50:1 (100:1 since 1994). Since its establishment, the French Ministry of Finance has indirectly continued influencing the decision-making regarding the CFA franc management.

36. Mali returned to the CFA franc system in 1984.

1964, land possession, water use, and consecutive murders in the borderland regions became serious issues. The border disputes between the two countries were acknowledged as a serious concern by the OAU (Lamizana 1999, 301-303).

According to former President Lamizana, the regime turnover of Mali worsened the border dispute. In 1968, the first Malian President Keita was ousted by a coup d'état launched by General Moussa Traoré. After Traoré ascended to power by force, Mali became more aggressive in claiming its territory and relocated Malian people into the disputed border regions (Lamizana 1999, 303-304).

Meetings for resolving the border dispute were held in September 1974 and were broken off between two countries. According to the former President of Upper Volta, in November 1974, Malian military officers violated Upper Volta's territory. After the unsuccessful meeting between heads of state, the war started (December 14, 1974). Malian troops invaded Upper Volta's territory, reaching 15 km inside the border. The military battle ended only two days after the initial firing, resulting in a few deaths, with the acceptance of mediation from other leaders of West African countries, such as Togolese President Eyadéma (Lamizana 1999, 304-316).

Then the two countries went to war again at the end of 1985 in a more severe battle than that in 1974. This second war was called "the Christmas War." This time, the military battle continued for five days and involved the mobilization of more massive weapons and resulted in many casualties. A Burkinabe government report outlined the 1985 battle between Burkina Faso and Mali as follows.³⁷

September 1983: Both countries filed border complaints to the ICJ (The Hague)

September 1984: Recommendation of compromise by the ICJ

November 24, 1985: Military tension caused by kidnapping of Burkinabe resident by Malian troops in Soum

December 14: Mali suspended diplomatic relations with Burkina Faso, accusing Burkinabe troops of occupying four Malian villages.

December 17: Anti-Burkina Faso campaign in Mali

December 20: Mediation of neighboring countries with President Sankara

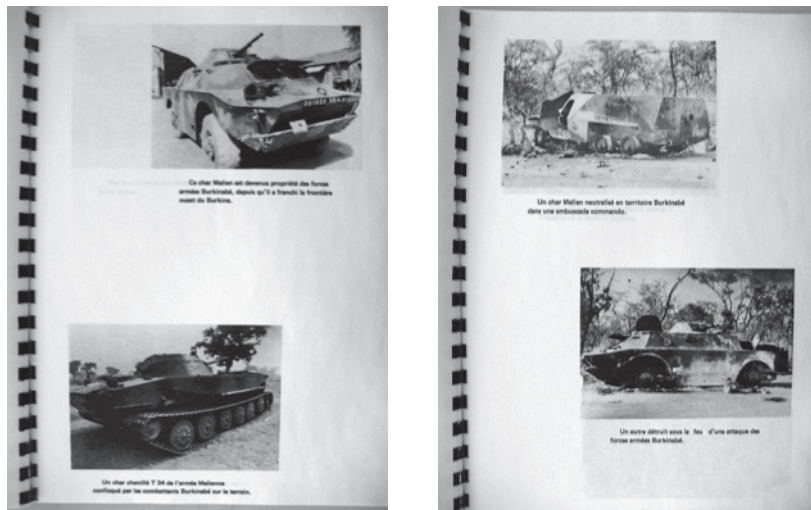
December 24: Message from Secretary-General of United Nations

Firing by Burkinabe troops in Malian territories

December 25: Firing by Malian troops

37. *Litige frontalier Mali-Burkina Faso, Affrontement de Noël 1985 une guerre absurde* [Mali-Burkina Faso border dispute, Christmas confrontation 1985 an absurd war], n.d. CNA-BF.

Figure 2: Christmas War between Burkina Faso and Mali in December 1985



Source: Government of Burkina Faso. (n.d.), *Litige frontalier Mali-Burkina Faso, Affrontement de noel 1985 une guerre absurde.*

December 26: Bombing of Sikasso by Burkinabe Mig

December 27: France did not intervene in this war.

Malian troops attacked Sourou dam and Bobo-Dioulasso.

December 29: Fight in Kololo

December 30: Signature for a ceasefire

January 10, 1986: The ICJ required the withdrawal of troops within 20 days.

However, the second war did not merely seem to be due to a border dispute but also due to more political and diplomatic reasons. The new military-revolutionary regime established in Burkina Faso in 1983, led by Captain Thomas Sankara, strongly displayed its revolutionary character. As Sankara was nicknamed “Africa’s Che (Guevara),” he was very eager to export Burkina Faso’s revolution to other African countries, especially neighboring countries. Seemingly, Sankara supported the opposition forces in Mali. Malian President Traoré was uncomfortable with Sankara’s interventions. This political motive encouraged the Malian side’s military attack (Jeune Afrique 2015). Malian troops not only attacked the border region but went deeper inside Burkinabe territories with their (Soviet-made) Mig fighter jets.

According to a Malian government report of October 1985, these disputed areas—four villages called Diounouga, Oukoulourou, Agalourou, and

Koubo—belonged to Mali (République du Mali, 1985).³⁸ Burkina Faso highlighted the ambiguous border zone between Burkina Faso and Mali at independence in 1960. Some people were living on both sides of the border. Mali appealed for recognition of the colonial border that had been modified in 1935 during Upper Volta's abolition.

Among other measures, the Chamber is asking the Governments of Burkina Faso and Mali to withdraw their armed forces to such positions, or behind such lines as may, within twenty days of the delivery of the Order, be determined by agreement between the two Governments, ..." (ICJ 1986b, 1)

Around 10 days after the ceasefire, the ICJ called both countries to withdraw their troops to enable them to start the ICJ's charge to resolve the border dispute.³⁹

The crucial question was which map made during the colonial era under the French authority the ICJ would use to make a ruling on the border dispute between the two countries.⁴⁰

A map, untitled and undated (according to Mali it dates from 1900–1902 or 1909–1910), representing the Gourma and bearing the reference 12 D/6, and a sketch-map annexed to a 1923 census of villages belonging to the *canton* of Mondoro, on which Dioulouna is given, but not the other villages mentioned in

38. République du Mali. (1985). *Memoire: Affaire du differend frontalier Burkina Faso/Mali* (Vol. 2), 271–281.

39. The ICJ reported, "On Thursday 9 January 1986, at 10 a.m., a public sitting is to be held at the Peace Palace, The Hague, for the purpose of hearing representatives of Burkina Faso and Mali. The Governments of those countries are parties to the *Frontier Dispute* case which at their request was referred to a Chamber of the Court by a Special Agreement jointly filed on 14 October 1983" (ICJ 1986c, 1).

40. The ICJ reported, "- A map of central Niger on the scale 1 : 1,000,000, compiled by Lieutenant Desplagnes in 1905, on which each of the five villages referred to in the Order is shown: Yoro, Dioulouna (spelt 'Dioukouna'), Oukoulou, Agoulourou, and Koubo. - A map of west Africa on the scale 1 : 2,000,000, sheet No.2: Timbuktu, published by the Geographical Service for the colonies in 1922, which shows Yoro, Dioukouna, Oukoulou (spelt 'Okolou') and Koubo, but not Agoulourou. However, a later edition of this map (1932) mentions only Yoro and Koubo. - The map of the colonies of French West Africa on the scale 1 : 500,000 (the Blondel la Rougery map of 1925) which shows Yoro, Oukoulou, Agoulourou and Koubo, but not Dioulouna. - The *Atlas des cercles de l'Afrique occidentale française* fascicle IV, map No.59, *cercle* of Ouahigouya (Geographical Service of French West Africa, 1926), which also shows Yoro, Oukoulou, Agoulourou and Koubo, but not Dioulouna. - A sketch-map of French Africa on the scale 1 : 1,000,000 (sheet ND-30, Ouagadougou) compiled in 1926, which shows Yoro, Oukoulou and Koubo, but not Dioulouna or Agoulourou" (ICJ 1986d, 55).

Order 2728 AP. These other villages, in view of their position on the maps mentioned below, apparently should not appear on the aforementioned maps and sketch-maps since they lay outside the *administrative* region covered by the maps and the sketch. (ICJ 1986d, 55)

Burkina Faso requested the Chamber of the ICJ to acknowledge their border according to the 1:200,000 scale map (1960 edition) of the French National Geographic Institute (*Institut géographique national*) depicting that the villages of Dioulouna, Oukoulou, Agoulourou, and Koubo had been located in Burkinabe territory (ICJ 1986d, 10–11).

However, Mali made the following different claim.

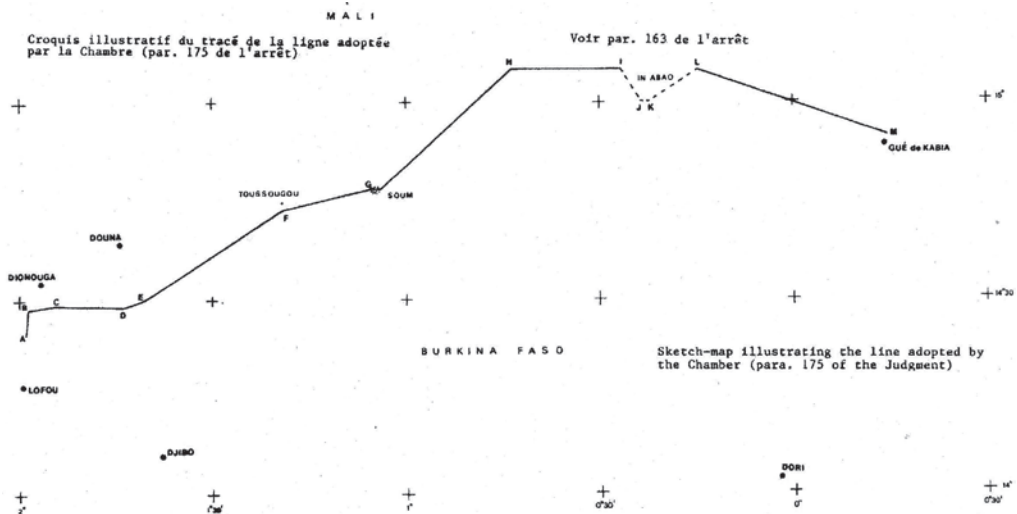
The Government of the Republic of Mali submits as follows:

To state that the frontier line between the Republic of Mali and Burkina Faso in the disputed area runs through the following points:

- Lofou,
- The mosque-shaped enclosure situated 2 kilometres to the north of Diguel,
- a point situated 3 kilometres to the south of Kounia,
- the Selba baobab,
- the Tondigaria,
- Fourfaré Tiaiga,
- Fourfaré Wandé,
- Gariol,
- Gountouré Kiri,
- A point to the east of the pool of Kétiouaire, having the following geographical co-ordinates,
Longitude 0° 44'47" W
Latitude 14° 56'52" N
- The pool of Raf Naman (ICJ 1986d, 11)

In order to achieve an equitable solution along these lines, on the basis of the applicable law, the Chamber finds that account must be taken, in particular, of the circumstances in which the *commandants* of two adjacent *cercles*, one in Mali and the other in Upper Volta, recognized in a 1965 agreement, not endorsed by the competent authorities, that the pool should be shared. It concludes that the pool of Soum must be divided in two in an equitable manner.

Figure 3: The ICJ's adopted border in the disputed area



Source: ICJ (1986c)

The line should therefore cross the pool in such a way as to divide its maximum area during the rainy season equally between the two States.” (ICJ 1986c, 14)

The ICJ concluded and offered its intermediary proposition after 11 months of judicial charge. Ultimately, the ICJ proposed that both countries accept sharing the pool, delimiting a border on the pool, and dividing it into two parts on an equal surface.

5. Conclusion

This paper revisited the history surrounding the border issue and disputes between Burkina Faso (Upper Volta) and Mali (French Sudan) as a symbolic case of Africa’s border issues and disputes by referring to colonial archival documents. Almost all African countries have suffered from border-originated problems and concerns since their independence. Consequently, border issues have continued to politically and economically threaten the security of African countries.

In the 21st century, border issues remain a contentious matter in every African country. Therefore, understanding such issues is crucial for understanding the challenges facing Africa’s domestic politics and international relations. Thus, this paper was intended to revisit and examine the origin of a border dispute on the

African continent.

Border management has become more of a focal issue for economic integration at the continental level since the African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA) was concluded among African countries in 2019. As the AU recognizes borders as bridges (no longer barriers; African Union Border Programme 2013, 88) among African states, borders and borderland regions are attracting more attention from policymakers and international organizations. Consequently, cross-border engagement and cooperation hold greater promise for each African country.

This paper examined the border history between Burkina Faso (Upper Volta) and Mali (French Sudan) as a case study. Both neighboring countries are landlocked. Therefore, the border dispute affects their economic and political security more severely than other African countries possessing their own coastal lines and ports. In recent years, both countries' borders have attracted more attention from the international community owing to regional security concerns. This region has become more destabilized particularly since Mali's coup d'état occurred in 2012. Due to the power vacuum caused by the coup, jihadist groups could expand their activities from the northern regions of Mali to more southern regions, including neighboring countries, such as Burkina Faso and Côte d'Ivoire, although United Nations peacekeeping operations have been conducted over the years.

The insurrection of 2014 and (failed) coup attempt of 2015 in Burkina Faso encouraged jihadist groups' activities. The insecurity of both countries' borderlands has already become a grave regional security concern for West Africa and the international community. Therefore, Africa's borders are becoming more significant for understanding current and future security, trade, and people's lives. However, the context of African border issues is not unique, despite common experiences as Burkina Faso's case. Therefore, we must understand the historical origin of the current African borders.

This paper reflected on the origin of contemporary Africa's border issues by revisiting border disputes between Burkina Faso and Mali. In resolving their border disputes, the two countries have progressed in their cross-border cooperation in the borderlands (Iwata 2016). Cross-border cooperation is required to strengthen peace and security cooperation for both countries. Severe political instabilities in both countries will inevitably undermine the achievements of their cross-border cooperation and borderland security. The political disaster that occurred in both countries is regrettable. Even six decades after the Year of Africa (1960), border issues are still significant concerns for African states. However, the African borders also provide potential opportunities to encourage free trade on the African

continent (including island nations). The African borders continue to be focal points for development, nation-building, security, and trade in Africa's future.

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