

# AN AFRICAN ISLAND'S TROUBLED WATERS

Relevant for: World & Indian Geography | Topic: Islands & Coral Reefs, changes therein and in Flora & Fauna and the Effects of such changes

Rich in resources: A general view of the small but densely populated Migingo Island. AFPYASUYOSHI CHIBA

A rounded, rocky outcrop covered with metallic shacks, Migingo Island rises out of the waters of Lake Victoria like an iron-plated turtle. The densely populated island is barely a quarter of a hectare large. There's little else but a few bars, brothels and a tiny port.

Nevertheless, for over a decade, Migingo has been a source of tension between Uganda and Kenya, who have been unable to decide to whom it really belongs.

## The 'smallest war'

They were once pushed to the brink of what some said would have been Africa's "smallest war" over the island. While fishing communities around Lake Victoria have seen their catches slowly diminish over the years, the deep waters surrounding Migingo abound with catch such as Nile perch.

It was in the early 2000s when the island was barely inhabited — then situated within Kenya on all maps — that it began drawing the attention of Ugandan authorities who sent officials to Migingo to tax fishermen and offer protection against pirates. Kenyan fishermen in return began complaining they were being shaken down by the Ugandans in their own waters and chased from the island. They called on Kenya's government, which deployed security forces to Migingo in a move that nearly brought the two nations to blows in 2009.

Kenya and Uganda then decided to create a joint commission to determine where the watery border is, relying on maps dating from the 1920s whose interpretation is a key point of contention. But nothing has come of the commission, and in the absence of any decisions on the boundary, the island is co-managed by both countries.

Faced with mounting complaints from their constituents, local Kenyan politicians have called on Nairobi to ask the International Court of Justice to intervene and make a decision on the border — to no avail.

On the island, some taunt each other good-naturedly. "This is Kenya," said Colins Ochyeng. "It's Uganda," fired back a Ugandan fisherman passing by, with a smile.

"I don't know who this island belongs to," said Kenyan fisherman Emmanuel Aringo. "These are all political issues and we just want to sell our fish."

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