

Decisive Thaw: The Changing Pattern of Relations between Nigeria and Equatorial Guinea, 1980-2005

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Abstract

This article examines the nature and changing pattern of relations between Nigeria and Equatorial Guinea from 1980-2005. It states that relations between the countries improved tremendously in the quarter century covered in this study compared to the two decades preceding that time frame (1960-1980) due to of a number of domestic political and economic changes that occurred in both countries, as well as the transformation of the international system in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The paper explores the specific changes that took place in Nigerian-Equatorial Guinean relations from 1980 onwards and the factors that influenced them. The termination of the brutal and violent rule of President Macias Nguema in Equatorial Guinea opened the way for improved relations between Nigeria and Equatorial Guinea. The shift from dependence on cocoa to petroleum exports in Equatorial Guinea also helped to promote cordial relations since the ill-treatment of Nigerian workers in Equatorial Guinea's cocoa plantations had been a thorny issue in Nigerian-Equatorial Guinean relations in previous decades. The end of the Cold War and apartheid between 1989 and 1994 were also important factors that shaped relations. All these were issues that had previously negatively affected cordial relations between the countries. This article therefore discusses relations between Nigeria and Equatorial Guinea within the context of the post-Cold War international system and intra-African relations. It also argues that although improvements were recorded in Nigerian-Equatorial Guinean relations between 1980 and 2005, there remain numerous avenues that could be explored for yet better relations.

Introduction

Relations between Nigeria and Equatorial Guinea took a turn in the 1980s. Dramatic changes in the domestic politics and economies of both countries, as well as developments in the global system, influenced the new pattern of relations. For over half a century, from the 1930s to the late 1970s, labor issues had dominated Nigerian-Equatorial Guinean relations. The dearth of labor to sustain the cocoa plantations of Equatorial Guinea had led the authorities of the Equatorial Guinea to embark on massive recruitment from other countries (Sundiata, 1974, pp. 99-101). From the mid-1930s, Nigerians came to dominate the labor that sustained Equatorial Guinea's cocoa and coffee plantations. As such, the process of recruitment and the conditions to which the immigrants were subjected became one of the major issues affecting the relations between Nigeria and Equatorial Guinea from the 1930s to the late 1970s. This pattern began to change in the 1980s.

From the early 20th century, when the need for recruitment of foreign labor was growing in Equatorial Guinea, pressure from a number of countries and organizations led to the boycott of Spanish Guinea's cocoa by some large buyers, compelling the Spanish authorities in Equatorial Guinea to direct their attention to the regulation of the labor trade and plantation owners, who were known to be brutal in their treatment of workers and who were ultimately sanctioned in different ways. Although the Spanish authorities' efforts did not dramatically change the ill-treatment of the plantation workers, they contributed modestly to the improvement of the conditions of Nigerian immigrants in Equatorial Guinea. But things changed again in 1968, after Equatorial Guinea gained independence. After only a few months of independence, President Francisco Macias Nguema began one of the most repressive dictatorships in Africa in the 1960s and 1970s (Aworawo, 2000, pp. 119-122). Under Macias, hundreds of thousands of Equatorial Guineans were murdered in the political violence that took place in the country. Immigrant workers suffered similarly. Since the vast majority of foreign immigrants were Nigerians, their ill-treatment and murder brought a clash between Nigeria and the repressive government of Equatorial Guinea under Macias Nguema. As fate would have it, Macias Nguema was overthrown in 1979, and conditions began to improve in the former Spanish colony. Nguema's removal set the stage for dramatic improvement in Nigerian-Equatorial Guinean relations from the early 1980s.

It was also in the 1980s that prospects for commercial exploitation of crude petroleum began to materialize in Equatorial Guinea. By the mid-1990s, petroleum exportation commenced in full (Liniger-Goumaz, 2000, pp. 371-375). As oil began to be exported in large quantities, the Equatorial Guinean cocoa and coffee plantations were abandoned. Many former plantation workers shifted to other economic activities, and the labor abuse that had characterized plantation agriculture almost entirely disappeared by the late 1990s. This change in the structure of Equatorial Guinea's economy removed a major source of conflict in its relations with Nigeria as the shift from large scale cocoa production made the demand for foreign unskilled labor unnecessary. It also shifted the focus of relations between the countries to other issues beyond labor. Cooperation in oil exploitation and maritime boundary delimitation became fresh issues that dominated relations.

The transformation of the international system in the late 1980s and early 1990s following the end of the Cold War also affected relations between Nigeria and Equatorial Guinea in diverse ways. While it is true that neither Nigeria nor Equatorial Guinea was a center of attention during the interventionism that characterized the Cold War, the new international environment that emerged after 1989 affected relations between both countries positively, nevertheless. Similarly ameliorative was the abolishing of apartheid as a state policy in South Africa in 1994. Nigeria had been at the forefront of the struggle to dismantle apartheid in South Africa since 1960, when it had gained independence from Britain. This pitched Nigeria against South Africa, and Nigerian-South African relations were some of the most intensely adversarial during the apartheid era. For some time in the 1970s and 1980s, apartheid South Africa made efforts to establish very close ties with Equatorial Guinea, and the Pretoria regime recorded a measure of success. This development was a source of irritation to Nigeria, which negatively affected relations with Equatorial Guinea. Therefore, the emergence of a multi-racial government in South Africa in 1994 created new conditions for the development of cordial relations between Equatorial Guinea and Nigeria, as a major source of disagreement was removed (Osuntokun, 1992, p. 87; *The Guardian*, 2001, p. 49).

It has been noted that relations between Nigeria and Equatorial Guinea also improved in the period under study as compared to previous decades as a result of concerted efforts by both governments to improve relations. Their determination to improve relations inspired both governments to adopt a diplomatic approach to issues that might have otherwise led to serious disagreements and conflict, such as the delineation of maritime boundaries. The desire to foster mutual cooperation also made it possible for Nigeria and Equatorial Guinea to explore other opportunities that arose due to changes in the international environment, notably the end of the Cold War and apartheid.

Our work confirms the perspective that the dynamics of relations among states change in accordance with the changing patterns of nations' own internal dynamics as well as the international environment in which nations interact. As Karl Deutsch and James Rosenau have argued, these factors combine with the idiosyncrasies of the individuals involved in the articulation and implementation of policy to determine the pattern of external relations (Deutsch, 1989, pp. 124-127; Rosenau, 1971, pp. 1-12). Michael Nicholson also identifies the political structure of a state (and whether it is democratic or authoritarian) as an important factor shaping foreign policy, an important concept in foreign policy analysis (Nicholson, 2002, pp. 21-22; Hill, 1978, pp. 154-155). Our work confirms these positions as is revealed in the pattern of Nigerian-Equatorial Guinean relations between 1968 and 1979 and the changes that took place after the overthrow of the authoritarian government of Macias Nguema in August 1979.

Trends of Nigerian-Equatorial Guinean Relations up to 1960

The origins of Nigerian-Equatorial Guinean relations can be traced to the late 19th century, when Britain and Spain, as imperial powers, handled the diplomatic activities of their respective territories. Britain handled the external affairs of Nigeria from the late 19th century to 1960, when Nigeria gained independence, while Spain did the same for Equatorial Guinea up to 1968 (Liniger-Goumaz, 1988, pp. 52; Osuntokun, 1978, pp. 1-4;

National Archives, Ibadan CSO3/145). The two countries are geographically close despite the fact that Nigeria is located in West Africa, while Equatorial Guinea is in Central Africa. Parts of the territories of both countries are located in the Bight of Biafra, an arm of the Atlantic Ocean, and the southernmost part of Nigeria in the Niger Delta area is only a little over a hundred kilometers to Malabo, the capital of Equatorial Guinea, located on Bioko Island. In spite of this, the fact that these countries were governed by different colonial powers for over a century separated them.

Formal interactions between what became Nigeria and Spanish Guinea began with the attempt by Britain in 1828 to move the headquarters of the Court of Mixed Commission from Freetown, Sierra Leone, to Malabo (formerly Santa Isabel), Equatorial Guinea, at the northern tip of Bioko Island. Britain sent a party led by Captain Fitz-William Owen for the purpose of occupying Bioko Island (formerly Fernando Po) for the British in 1827. Britain evacuated the island in 1834 following disagreements with Spain over the terms of the occupation. In spite of this, many British citizens remained there and dominated the commerce and even provided an “informal” government for the neglected island until 1843, when Spain re-occupied it. Thus, when in June 1849, John Bancroft was appointed Her Britannic Majesty Consul to the Bights of Benin and Biafra, it was Bioko’s capital of Malabo that was his base (National Archives, London FO 84/775; Dike, 1956, p. 9). In fact, Malabo remained the capital of the Consulate until it was moved by Consul Hewett to Calabar in southeast Nigeria in 1882.

The introduction of cocoa from the island of São Tomé to Bioko, Equatorial Guinea’s major island, in 1854 transformed Equatorial Guinea’s economy. Cocoa cultivation began to dominate the economy of Bioko from the 1860s, as the island’s cocoa was sought after because of its quality. Coffee, too, was introduced at that time, and it did well (Fegley, 1989, p. 24). Still, plantation agriculture in Bioko faced one major problem: labor. The island’s indigenous population was generally uninterested in working as laborers and was too small to be of much service. After unsuccessful attempts to secure labor from Angola, Mozambique, Ghana, Malaya, and China, and after efforts to recruit laborers from Liberia led to a scandal involving top government officials and their subsequent resignations in 1930, the Spanish authorities turned to Nigeria for immigrant labor. Unfortunately, the recruited laborers were constantly and persistently ill-treated. The conditions to which the Nigerian laborers were subjected in Spanish Guinea forced Nigeria to react to the complaints of the immigrants and became an issue that would dominate Nigerian-Equatorial Guinean relations during the colonial and immediate post-independence periods (Sundiata, 1990, p. 24; Liniger-Goumaz, 1989, pp. 43-44).

In response to the complaints of Nigerian laborers in Bioko and in order to stop illegal recruitments, a treaty was signed between Nigeria and the Spanish authorities in Bioko in December 1942. Similar agreements were signed with the same objective in 1946, 1950, 1954, and 1959 (Federal Ministry of Information, Nigeria 1971; National Archives, Calabar, CA NA/66 Femlab, 1/12/1). The number of Nigerians in Equatorial Guinea was estimated at about ten thousand in 1940, and the number increased progressively in the decades that followed (Campos, 2003, p. 101). The majority of Nigerian immigrants in Equatorial Guinea were from southeastern Nigeria, and, in addition to a few who willingly made their way to Bioko, many of them were smuggled across the waters in the Bight of Biafra (National Archives, Calabar CADIST 13/1/414).

Eager to improve their lot, many Nigerians were oblivious to the conditions they would face in the new land, where they sought adventure and improved economic well-being. The conditions in eastern Nigeria, where the Igbo constitute the dominant ethnic group, made immigration an attractive option from the 1920s to the 1940s. The majority of the individuals in eastern Nigeria were farmers with limited economic opportunities. In addition, the population was large relative to available land (Van Den Bersselaar, 2005, p. 43; Direccion General de Marruecos y Colonias, 1947, p. 31.). These conditions encouraged people to move in fairly large numbers. The immigrants were also drawn to a new land by the better-than-factual stories that were told of the opportunities and prevailing conditions in Equatorial Guinea. Consequently, these push and pull factors all played a major role in the migration of Nigerians to Equatorial Guinea in the early 20th century. As it turned out, these issues of migration would become prominent in Nigerian-Equatorial Guinean relations in both the colonial and post-colonial periods.

The British colonial authorities were gravely disturbed by the labor abuse to which Nigerians were reportedly subjected on Equatorial Guinean plantations. Britain had abolished the slave trade in 1807 and was at the forefront of the struggle against elements that tried to perpetuate the trade, which was regarded by that time as illegitimate (Oliver and Atmore, 1996, p.57). Disturbing reports of the pattern of recruitment of foreign labor to Equatorial Guinea and the conditions to which they were subjected in the Spanish territory led the colonial government in Nigeria to establish a special branch of the colonial police in 1927 to deal specifically with the smuggling of Nigerians to Bioko. This was followed by the Labor Ordinance of 1929, which prohibited recruitment of Nigerians anywhere. The ordinance was specifically targeted at Spanish Guinea's labor trade, the notoriety of which was becoming well known in the 1920s. As early as 1900, Britain had been interested in the condition of the workers in the cocoa plantations (Liniger Goumaz, 1989, p. 108). Disturbing reports were made of the repression that occurred on the plantations of both Spanish Guinea and São Tomé and Príncipe. The British authorities investigated and found that immigrant laborers were frequently maltreated and even killed. The conclusion of the various investigations was that the working conditions on the plantations were hardly distinguishable from those that existed during the slave trade (Sundiata, 1974, pp. 97-112).

As the colonial powers administering Nigeria and Equatorial Guinea, Britain and Spain sought ways to resolve the problem of labor abuse, for which the Spanish territory had now become famous and which remained a source of irritation to the British. Illegal recruitment of Nigerians to work in Equatorial Guinea's plantations had continued despite the efforts by the British to intercept the traffickers and arrest them. The activities of the special branch of the police established in 1927 to specifically deal with the problem could not stop the labor trade. Britain therefore decided to legalize recruitment. It was this legalization that led to the signing of the Anglo-Spanish Labor Agreement of 1942, which was aimed at regulating labor recruitment and providing consular assistance to the immigrants. The overall objective was to reduce ill-treatment and labor abuse to the barest minimum. This was one of the steps taken to tackle the problem of labor abuse, which had, until that time, negatively affected relations between colonial Nigeria and Spanish Guinea, and by extension Britain and Spain since Britain was strongly opposed

to the ill-treatment of the immigrants from its controlled territory of Nigeria by the Spanish authorities. (Ejituwu, 1995, pp. 43-44; Akinyemi 1986, pp. 134-135).

Pattern of Relations from Nigeria's Independence through the Macias Nguema Dictatorship

Nigeria became an independent state in October 1960, after nearly a century of British colonial domination. Shortly before independence, Nigerian leaders developed a set of principles for the conduct of the country's external relations. The foreign policy structure that emerged stressed that Nigeria was to maintain special relations with African states and assist territories still under colonial rule in their struggle for independence. The eradication of racism from Africa and the promotion of pan-Africanism were other important aspects of Nigeria's foreign policy at independence (Aluko, 1981, pp. 3-4; Olusanya and Akindele, 1986, pp. 5-6). Equatorial Guinea, for its part, remained a Spanish colony up to 1968. This meant that Nigerian leaders had to deal with the Spanish colonial authorities in the conduct of Nigeria's relations with Equatorial Guinea. The problem of ill-treatment of Nigerian immigrants in Equatorial Guinea persisted in the 1960s through the 1980s. During this period, labor issues continued to dominate relations between the two countries.

Equatorial Guinea gained independence from Spain on 12 October 1968. From this point, Nigeria began to relate with Equatorial Guinea as an independent state. There were expectations that relations between Nigeria and Equatorial Guinea would improve after the latter's independence. However, such improvement did not materialize because Macias Nguema, the first president of Equatorial Guinea, became authoritarian and violent within only months of taking office. The chaotic environment that emerged compromised relations between Equatorial Guinea and several other countries including Nigeria (Fegley, 1989, pp. 115-119). As 1968 drew to a close, conditions worsened progressively in Equatorial Guinea, and by early 1969, repression and political violence had expanded tremendously. Macias Nguema paid no heed to anyone appealing for political change as he moved to crush all opposition groups and dissenting voices. Government agents also joined in the brutality against Nigerians, and plantation owners found the prevailing conditions conducive to intensifying their ill-treatment of immigrant laborers. Indeed, in the violent milieu that developed as the Macias dictatorship worsened, the repression of Nigerians even extended to the Nigerian Embassy staff in Malabo.

Macias had earlier ordered resident Spaniards to leave the country, claiming that their safety could no longer be guaranteed. He then sent urgent messages to United Nations Secretary-General, U Thant, on 28 February and 1 March 1969 for military assistance to counter what he called "Spanish aggression." Macias had accused Franco and the Spanish government of undermining the stability of his newly independent state by interfering in its internal affairs (Hélali and Klotchkoff, 1999, p.79). By applying for military assistance from the United Nations, it was clear that Macias had limited knowledge about the organization's mandate. In the violence that ensued, the Spanish government evacuated its citizens from Equatorial Guinea. Other European nationals were likewise evacuated so that by early April 1969, less than one hundred Europeans were left of the 8,000 that had been in the country at the beginning of the year (Hélali and

Klotchkoff, 1999, pp. 79-80; Achegaray, 1974, pp. 374). Unfortunately for Equatorial Guineans, as they suffered from the Macias repression, so, too, did their country's economy; it suffered from depression, as the Europeans who played an important role in sustaining the economy by providing skilled manpower and capital left the country. Hardly anyone in Equatorial Guinea was spared of the effects of the Macias reign of terror, and Nigerian immigrants in the country suffered immeasurably.

The economic depression of Equatorial Guinea progressively worsened in 1969 and 1970. It was during this period that Macias ordered the plantation administrators to stop the payment of wages to Nigerian laborers. As would be expected, the workers began to agitate for the payment of their wages, and this was met with ruthless repression. Between 1970 and 1971, at least 95 Nigerians were killed in Equatorial Guinea, the majority for demanding their pay. In April 1974, during one such agitation, a Nigerian was killed when the Equatorial Guinea militia intervened. This time, unlike the response to similar previous killings, the Nigerian ambassador demanded to see the corpse and some explanation. He was rebuffed. The Nigerian Embassy staff, alongside Nigerian immigrant workers, soon became a target of the Equatorial Guinean authorities (Osuntokun, 1978, pp. 53-54). The reports of these molestations and killings further worsened the already strained relations between Equatorial Guinea and Nigeria.

When a new government came to power in Nigeria in July 1975, it did not tolerate the abuse of its citizens in Equatorial Guinea. Toward the end of 1975, the Nigerian government decided to evacuate all Nigerians from Equatorial Guinea. Two air force planes were sent for the evacuation, along with a vessel of the Nigerian National Shipping Line, the "MV Nnamdi Azikiwe." By December 1975, ten thousand Nigerians had returned home, and by the end of January 1976, close to 30,000 Nigerians had been evacuated from Equatorial Guinea. As the evacuation continued, it was reported that the local militia invaded the Nigerian embassy in Malabo, where some of the immigrants had taken refuge to escape brutalization from the agents of Macias. The immigrants waiting for evacuation were attacked right in the Embassy's garden. Eleven of them were killed in the ensuing melee (Fegley, 1989, p. 85; *Sunday Times*, 1976, p. 2; Amupitan, 1985, pp. 9-10). Such was the plight of Nigerians in Equatorial Guinea at the height of the Macias Nguema dictatorship. Under these circumstances, any thought of an improvement in Nigerian Equatorial Guinean relations was unrealistic. This was the state of affairs until Macias Nguema was overthrown in a military coup on 3 August 1979.

Internal Dynamics and the Transformation of Nigerian-Equatorial Guinean Relations, 1980-2005

During the second half of 1979, far-reaching changes began to take place in the political milieu of Equatorial Guinea. The Macias Nguema dictatorship began to increasingly consume members of Nguema's own Fang ethnic group and even some members of his inner circle, individuals who had been generally spared in the early stages of the liquidation of the dictatorship. In addition, the country became completely paralyzed after over a decade of tyranny and political violence. At that point, the possibility of the ouster of Macias Nguema became feasible. The reality eventually came on 3 August 1979, when Francisco Macias Nguema was overthrown in a military coup

led by his nephew Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo, which brought the Macias tyranny to an end. Efforts were made to quickly rebuild the country and restore some dignity to the collapsed state (Liniger-Goumaz, 1989, pp. 65-66). This change in the affairs of Equatorial Guinea introduced some new dimensions to the country's relations with Nigeria. Similar developments took place in Nigeria, where the military government of General Olusegun Obasanjo handed over power to the civilian government of Shehu Shagari on 1 October 1979 (Falola and Ihonvbere, 1985, pp. 1-3). The two governments sought to establish new relations. A new pattern of relations between Nigeria and Equatorial Guinea thus emerged in 1980.

Following the collapse of the Macias Nguema dictatorship in 1979, aid of various kinds poured into Equatorial Guinea from various countries and organizations. With this assistance came attempts by some of the donor countries to exercise influence on the new government. Amidst such pressures Equatorial Guinea's new leader, Obiang Nguema Mbasogo, sought to promote cordial relations between his country and Nigeria. It was this display of goodwill that encouraged President Shehu Shagari of Nigeria to set up a Presidential Task Force on Equatorial Guinea on 25 February 1982. These efforts eventually led to the establishment of the Nigeria-Equatorial Guinea Joint Commission in April 1982. This agreement provided for the promotion of bilateral relations in the areas of agriculture, telecommunication, fishing, friendship and good neighborliness, culture, and commerce. The Shagari government was committed to assisting Equatorial Guinea. Nigeria proposed the establishment of telephone links between the capital, Malabo, located on Equatorial Guinea's biggest island, Bioko, and Luba, a small Equatorial Guinean island close to Bioko. This was in line with Nigeria's policy of providing support for fellow African states. These developments entirely changed the pattern of relations between Nigeria and Equatorial Guinea from its former pattern of conflict and mutual distrust (Osuntokun, 1992, p. 2).

However, it should be noted that the persistent ill-treatment of Nigerians resident in Equatorial Guinea remained a source of concern for Nigeria. This seemingly intractable problem, which had negatively affected relations between the two countries for nearly a century, remained a *casus belli* in the 1980s. When Nigerian laborers in Equatorial Guinea were evacuated in 1976, some of the immigrants stayed on. And with the economic recession that hit Nigeria from 1982, many Nigerians found their way back to Equatorial Guinea. Over the years, the government in Malabo continued to request that Nigerian laborers revive the abandoned cocoa plantations, which had previously been the backbone of the economy. Unfortunately, much as the Malabo authorities desired the services of Nigerian workers, they did very little to tackle the problem of labor abuse. In the 1980s and 1990s, cases of brutalization of Nigerians in Equatorial Guinea continued to be reported (*National Concord*, 1985, pp. 5-6).

The level of closeness between Nigeria and Equatorial Guinea grew progressively in the 1980s and 1990s. For instance, when Obiang Mbasogo, the Equatorial Guinean leader converted from military to civilian leader on 12 October 1982, it was Nigeria's President Shuhu Shagari that he invited to perform the installation. The Nigerian Vice-President, Dr. Alex Ekwueme, represented President Shagari in Malabo. Cordial relations between Nigeria and Equatorial Guinea continued even after the Shagari government was overthrown in a military coup in December 1983. For instance, when Nigeria introduced the Technical Aid Corps Scheme in 1987, through which Nigeria would supply skilled

manpower to a number of African and Caribbean countries at Nigeria's expense, Equatorial Guinea was one of the beneficiaries (Akinyemi, 1987, pp. 1-2; Daura, 2006, pp. 3-8). Teachers, doctors, and accountants were all sent to Equatorial Guinea by the Nigerian government, and they all made their mark over the years. This further promoted close relations between Nigeria and Equatorial Guinea from 1997 onwards.

In Nigeria, the news of the mass murder of Nigerians in Equatorial Guinea was very disturbing. It was therefore not surprising that as the 20th century drew to a close, some Nigerians publically called for military action against Equatorial Guinea (Akinterinwa, 1998, p. 10). Because the government of Equatorial Guinea was desirous of maintaining very cordial relations with Nigeria, it was highly responsive to calls to address problems that were capable of adversely affecting relations between the two countries. This was the case when, in 1985, the Nigerian government demanded the prosecution of Bienvenido Ndong Mba and Eusebio Mba Nchama, two Equatorial Guinean policemen who had murdered a Nigerian immigrant, Edem Tom in Malabo. The two policemen were tried and jailed on 6 May 1985 (*National Concord* 1985:6). The efforts of the government of Equatorial Guinea to address genuine grievances from Nigeria and Nigeria's determination to assist its southern neighbor certainly created the condition for improved relations from 1980-2005.

In the early 1980s, as in previous decades, the most explosive cases of abuse of Nigerian immigrants in Equatorial Guinea took place on the plantations. The abandonment of the cocoa plantations as oil production expanded in the late 1980s and early 1990s meant the removal of a major source of disagreement between Nigeria and Equatorial Guinea. The process of aerial geophysical survey and prospecting for oil was carried out in Equatorial Guinea by a number of oil companies in the 1960s and 1970s. Of these, Chevron Oil, Continental Oil and Mobil Spain were some of the most prominent. The exploration indicated that Equatorial Guinea had a fairly large quantity of petroleum deposits. In January 1980, Equatorial Guinea formed the Empresa Guineo-Española de Petroleos S.A. (GEPESA), which was a joint venture between Equatorial Guinea and the Spanish state-owned company, Hispanoil. Petroleum exploitation was expected to commence in 1984, but it was in 1991 that production eventually began. Figures from various sources indicate that Equatorial Guinea's earnings from oil were about USD 20 million in 1996 and USD500 million in 2000 (*The Guardian* 2001:49). By the end of 2005, earnings from oil and gas were over USD 900 million, accounting for some 97 percent of the country's total exports, compared to a total of USD 25 million in annual exports from 1985 to 1990. Nine hundred million dollars is certainly a decent income for a country with a total population of only about 450,000 in the late 1990s and 550,000 in 2005. In July 2008, Equatorial Guinea's total population was estimated to be 616,459 (Liniger-Goumaz, 1998, pp.371-381; U.S. Department of State, 2009, pp. 1-2). The impact of petroleum exports on the country's economy has been quite significant. It is therefore easy to understand why the cocoa farms were abandoned as the government focused almost exclusively on oil.

The economic transformation of Equatorial Guinea arising from expanding oil exports affected its relations with Nigeria in a number of ways. To begin with, the shift of attention from cocoa to oil curtailed the need for unskilled labor from Nigeria since the late 1990s. In addition, many cocoa farms were abandoned as oil export expanded. This

provided the opportunity for many Nigerian immigrants who had worked in the plantations to leave and seek other forms of economic activity. A good number took to trading. The abandonment of the cocoa farms also meant that the number of Nigerian immigrants in Equatorial Guinea decreased significantly. Many Nigerians who made their way to Equatorial Guinea from the late 1990s were traders who did not have to get involved in the complications of plantation life. Moreover, many of them did not take up permanent residence in Equatorial Guinea. They simply took their merchandise from Nigeria to the Equatorial Guinea and returned home after selling them in the former Spanish colony.

From the late 1990s through the first decade of the 21st century, Equatorial Guinea has attracted adventurers from West and Central Africa who have been enticed by the country's ever increasing petro-dollar. The transformation from plantation life also meant the removal of a major source of conflict between Nigeria and Equatorial Guinea. As the plantations disappeared, so, too, did the labor abuse that had characterized their operations. This is not to suggest that the brutalization of Nigerian immigrants completely ceased with the expansion of oil exports in Equatorial Guinea. Different agents of government continued to hound and beat immigrants, and Nigerians were among them. However, the almost total abandonment of the plantations led to a drastic reduction of cases of abuse, as most of the reported cases up to the mid-1980s had come from the plantations. This also reduced the tension in the countries' relations created by labor abuse in Equatorial Guinea.

Oil production in Equatorial Guinea also created fresh avenues for mutual cooperation between Nigeria and Equatorial Guinea. The fact is that the exploitation of oil and gas in Equatorial Guinea has been largely done offshore. These are areas where Equatorial Guinea has overlapping maritime claims with neighboring Nigeria, São Tomé and Príncipe, Cameroon, and Gabon. And the offshore boundaries are quite close to the land. For instance, the distance between Malabo in Equatorial Guinea and Calabar in Nigeria is only 72 nautical miles. Zafiro, Equatorial Guinea's major source of hydrocarbons is located 35 kilometers offshore northeast of Malabo. Nigeria and Equatorial Guinea have overlapping exclusive economic zones and both could lay claim to Zafiro. This led the leaders of both countries to seek a diplomatic resolution to the problem (National Boundary Commission, 1997, pp. 1-11; Tobor and Ajayi, 1995, pp. 58-62). The issue of maritime boundary delimitation between Nigeria and Equatorial Guinea was one of the major reasons for a state visit by Nigeria's Head of State, Ibrahim Babangida to Equatorial Guinea in December 1990. President Babangida proposed the establishment of a Gulf of Guinea Commission to, among other things, oversee the exploitation of the resources of the Gulf of Guinea for the mutual benefit of member states. The commission would also be expected to coordinate the maritime boundary delimitation among Nigeria and Equatorial Guinea, as well as Gabon and Cameroon, and resolve disputes that might arise from the sharing of resources. While efforts were being made to get the countries around the Bight of Biafra to support the arrangements to establish the commission, Nigeria and Equatorial Guinea began discussions of maritime boundary delimitation at the bilateral level.

In 1991, Nigerian and Equatorial Guinean governments agreed to appoint representatives to study the maritime claims and make recommendations. A Joint Committee of Experts on the delimitation of their maritime boundaries was eventually

established. The Nigerian and Equatorial Guinean representatives met seventeen times, five of which took place in Europe, before an agreement was concluded in July 2000. Earlier, a report of the Joint Committee published in February 1997 stated: "After examining all the issues involved, the Committee decided to adopt the customary/trade usage principle as a parameter for delimiting the Nigeria-Equatorial Guinea boundary. [T]he Nigerian oil concession line and that of Equatorial Guinea agree with each other from the Tripoint with Cameroon to somewhere after Zafiro oil well." Based on this it was agreed that "sixty percent of the Zafiro oil field is found to be in Equatorial Guinea while 40 percent is found to be in Nigeria" (National Boundary Commission, 1997, pp. 1-11). The acceptance of this conclusion by Nigeria and Equatorial Guinea has helped to lay to rest a delicate issue that would surely have been capable of causing disagreement that might have degenerated to violence.

For decades, Nigeria and Cameroon engaged each other in violent conflict over the Bakassi Peninsula, a boundary territory in Nigeria's south-east with huge deposits of hydrocarbons, just like those found in Zafiro. Even after the ruling of the International Court of Justice in October 2002, the crisis could not be said to have been fully resolved (Oyewo, 2005, pp. 184-201). It is for this reason that the maturity with which Nigeria and Equatorial Guinea have handled their maritime boundary delimitation has been commended. Their diplomatic approach has helped to reassure Equatorial Guinea, which at one time expressed fear of domination from its bigger northern neighbor (National Boundary Commission, 1997, p. 11). The agreement has also enabled Equatorial Guinea and Nigeria to carry out petroleum exploitation in the Bight of Biafra under a peaceful environment (*The Guardian*, 2001, p. 49). What remains to be accomplished is the establishment of a Gulf of Guinea Commission to accommodate the interest of the other countries with conflicting offshore claims in the area such as São Tomé and Príncipe, Cameroon, and Gabon. In the meantime, the point to be stressed is that Nigeria and Equatorial Guinea have turned what might have constituted a nagging problem into an opportunity to solidify cordial relations with each other.

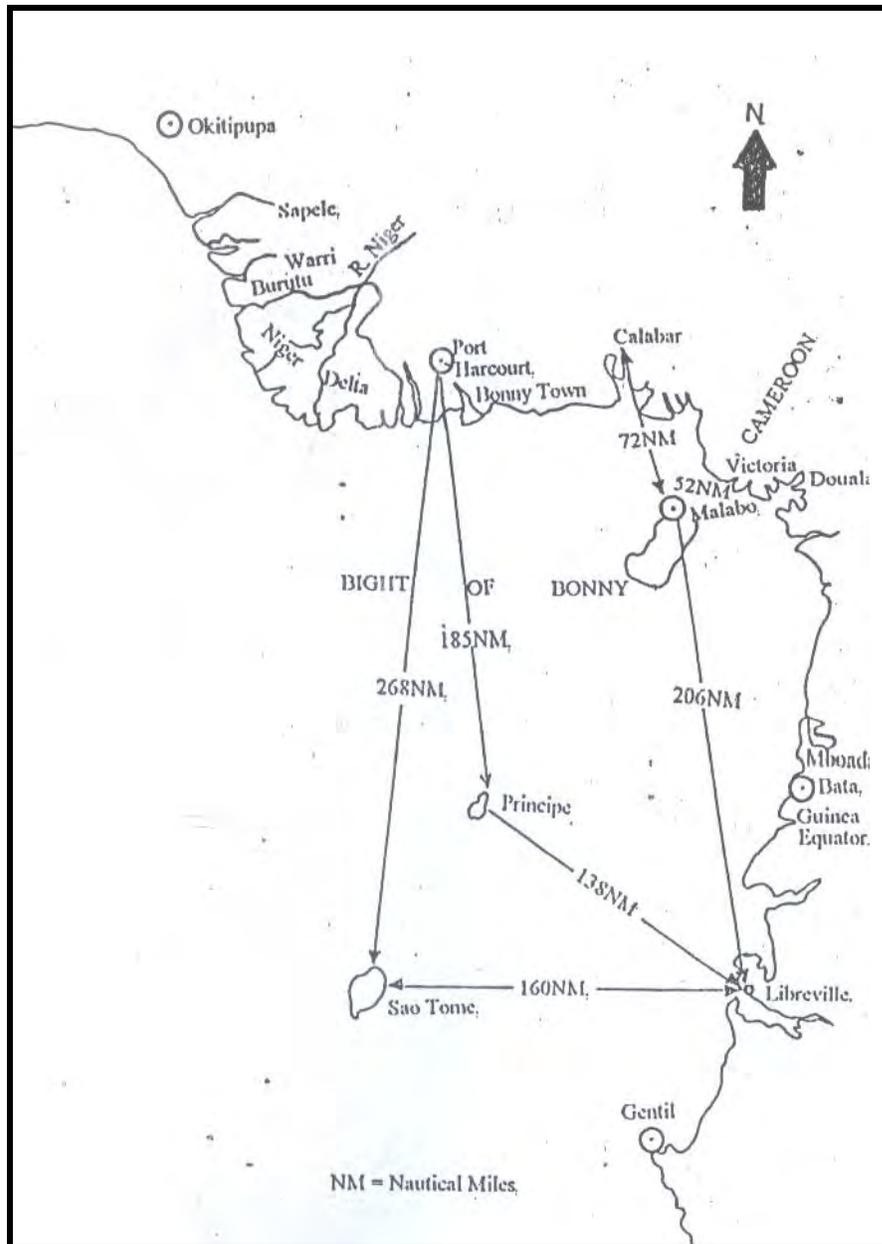


Fig.1:Nigeria/Equatorial Guinea Maritime Boundary Delimitation

Source: D. Aworawo, "Diplomacy and the Development of Equatorial Guinea, 1900-1990". Doctoral Thesis, University of Lagos, 2002, p.267.

The Influence of the End of Apartheid and the Cold War

The end of the Cold War in 1989 and the abrogation of apartheid as a state policy in South Africa in the early 1990s also influenced the pattern of Nigerian-Equatorial Guinean relations in diverse ways. In addition to the domestic political and economic changes in Nigeria and Equatorial Guinea already discussed, these global developments combined to alter the nature of interactions between the two countries in the 1990s up to

the end of the period covered in this study. A consideration of some developments in relations between Nigeria and Equatorial Guinea in the 1970s and 1980s reveals this.

In 1986, even as a thaw in Nigerian-Equatorial Guinean relations was steadily developing, other problems arose which adversely affected the pattern of friendly relations that had taken shape. The problems were primarily caused by Equatorial Guinea's approval of some South Africans to operate in Malabo. At this time, South Africa was seen as one of Nigeria's greatest enemies because of the apartheid policy that was practiced in South Africa, to which Nigeria was inexorably opposed (Ajala, 1986, pp. 196-210). With only about one hundred kilometers between Malabo and Nigeria's delta oil fields, the permission granted to the South Africans to work in Malabo was too dangerous for Nigeria to ignore. The presence of South Africans in Malabo was thus perceived as a threat to Nigeria's interest and security.

This brought to the fore once again the strategic importance of Equatorial Guinea, which had previously manifested itself in an Anglo-German rivalry in the area during the two world wars. Controlling Bioko Island was a decisive factor in the success of the two countries' campaigns on the west coast of Africa in the 1910s and 1940s in efforts to protect their respective colonies (Osuntokun, 1974, pp. 291-292). Now in 1986, this issue resurfaced anew but this time between independent Nigeria and Equatorial Guinea. At first, Equatorial Guinean authorities denied the presence of South Africans in Malabo. Thus, in spite of earlier reports that categorically stated that South Africa was commencing the installation of some devices around the Malabo airport, Equatorial Guinea consistently reassured Nigeria of the absence of any South African activity anywhere within its borders (*Newswatch*, 1988, p. 15; Sundiata, 1990, pp. 85-86). It would appear that the Nigerian government was initially satisfied with Equatorial Guinea's reassurance. In fact, the countries' relations had improved so much that Nigeria that provided the aircraft that conveyed the Equatorial Guinean delegation to the meeting of the Organization of African Unity in Ethiopia in May 1987. Three months later, in August 1987, Nigeria's Foreign Minister, Professor Bolaji Akinyemi paid an official visit to Equatorial Guinea. During the visit, not much was revealed to indicate surreptitious activities of South Africa in the Central African country. The visit therefore ended on a cordial note.

Nigeria began to doubt the reassurances of the government of Equatorial Guinea beginning in early 1988, however, as people perceived to be agents of the South African government became more and more visible in Bioko. At this point, it became extremely difficult for the Equatorial Guinean government to continue to deny the presence of South Africans, who were undertaking some projects in Malabo. It was unclear what the South Africans were doing and the extent of the threat that their presence in Equatorial Guinea posed to Nigeria. There were strong suspicions that the apartheid regime in South Africa was attempting to install some military devices in Equatorial Guinea to threaten Nigeria's security. Many analysts in Nigeria were quick to draw parallels with the Cuban Missile crisis when the U.S.S.R attempted to undermine the security of the United States by establishing military presence in Cuba. Of course, Nigeria did not handle the threat with levity. On 3 May 1988, Nigeria's new Foreign Affairs Minister, General Ike Nwachukwu, visited Equatorial Guinea. He met President Mbasogo and expressed great displeasure over the South African affair. He made it unequivocally clear that Nigeria

would not tolerate the presence of South Africans in Bioko and urged President Mbasogo to take action. Fortunately for both countries, the Equatorial Guinean leader cherished his country's friendly relations with Nigeria, and so he promised to send the South Africans away. By early 1989, the South Africans had apparently left Equatorial Guinea (Osuntokun, 1992, p. 87; *The Guardian*, 1988, p. 10; *Daily Times*, 1988, p. 7; *The Guardian*, 1989, p. 5; *National Concord*, 1992, p. 7).

Nigeria continued to view the relations between Equatorial Guinea and South Africa with caution despite the fact that the controversial South Africans departed Equatorial Guinea in early 1989. This was especially so because of the initial denial by the government of Equatorial Guinea when the issue was first raised. However, Nigeria did not have to agonize for long. South Africa's president, Pieter Botha, resigned in August 1989 and was succeeded by F.W. de Clerk. The new president immediately began reforms that led to negotiations with black leaders. On 2 February 1990, as Parliament opened, de Clerk announced to a stunned international community that Nelson Mandela was to be released from prison. After twenty-seven years in confinement, Mandela stepped out of jail on 11 February 1990. At the same time, long-banned liberation movements and nationalist organizations such as the African National Congress (ANC), Pan Africanist Congress (PAC), and South African Communist Party (SACP) were unbanned. This set the stage for the emergence of a multi-party and multi-racial democracy in South Africa. Mandela was finally inaugurated president of South Africa on 10 May 1994, and what was left of apartheid as a state policy disappeared shortly thereafter (Beck, 2000, pp. 181-190). Since there was no more apartheid to contend with, relations between Nigeria and South Africa improved tremendously. This also removed the apprehension over the influence of South Africa over Equatorial Guinea and the perceived security threat to Nigeria.

The end of the Cold War in 1989 was the other major external influence on Nigerian-Equatorial Guinean relations in the period under study. At independence, Equatorial Guinea's president Macias Nguema declared his opposition to "imperialists" and "neo-colonialists," including "Marxists." Some analysts have, on account of this, described Macias' foreign policy as a mixture of militant anti-colonialism and African humanism. However, in spite of his condemnation of Marxism, Equatorial Guinea maintained very special relations with socialist countries, notably China, Cuba, and the U.S.S.R (Fegley, 1989, pp. 113-116). For instance, in June 1970 Equatorial Guinea signed a preferential trade agreement and a shipping treaty with the Soviet Republic. The Russians also granted loans to Equatorial Guinea. The shipping agreement granted the Russians permission to establish a pilot project of fishery development and a naval base at Luba. Russia was, in return, to supply fish to Equatorial Guinea. China and Cuba also gave different forms of financial, military, and technical assistance to Equatorial Guinea, which gave them a measure of influence in Equatorial Guinea. This gave the socialists an advantage when the war in Angola broke out in 1975 (Fegley, 1989, pp. 114-115).

The Portuguese colonial authorities in Angola hurriedly left on 11 November 1975 without handing over to any recognizable authority. This gave rise to the establishment of two rival governments by the liberation movements that had been involved in the struggle for independence. The Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola (MPLA) established its capital at Luanda, and its leader, Dr. Agostino Neto, was a socialist. The Soviet Union and Cuba quickly moved to support Dr. Neto. A rival

government was established by União Nacional para a independência Total de Angola (UNITA) at Huambo. Apartheid South Africa supported UNITA, which struggled for supremacy with MPLA. Naturally, the United States government of Gerald Ford supported UNITA. Together, the USA and South Africa conspired to plot the fall of the MPLA government (Ajala, 1986, p. 202; Legum 1999, p. 10). Before long, Angola became a theatre of war with superpower involvement. It was at this point that Equatorial Guinea became important in the East/West rivalry of the Cold War. Equatorial Guinea is geographically very close to Angola, and its strategic advantage was fully utilized by the Soviet Union in the superpower rivalry in Angola. In the contest, Russia's gains became losses of the Western allies in Angola.

The naval base which was under Soviet Union control before the crisis broke out in Angola broke was fully utilized by the socialists in the Angolan war. The base was sealed off for spy trawlers and submarines, and arms were transferred from there to Luanda in Angola. Russian ships anchored in Luba and MPLA ships came to load arms there. Cuban troops also stopped over in Luba before making their way to Angola (Fegley, 1989, p. 112). The socialists also established intelligence and communication facilities Luba that proved crucial in the Angolan war. Apart from the valuable use to which the Russians and Cubans put the port of Luba during the Angolan war, the Soviet Union further stretched its influence to Malabo. The Russians were desirous of establishing a direct link with Angola through Malabo. Consequently, Russian aviation personnel and technicians helped to fix and operate the Malabo International Airport, which had become dilapidated by the mid-1970s. This made it possible for the Soviet airline, Aeroflot, to use the Malabo airport as a transit point to Angola. Equatorial Guinea was thus indirectly involved in the East/West rivalry of the Cold War (Klintonberg, 1978, p. 22; Fegley, 1989, p. 112).

It is true that Nigeria also supported the MPLA government of Dr. Agostino Neto, but its support was not out of ideological consideration. The Obasanjo government announced that its support was out of concern for the political stability of Angola. The reality was that at independence, Nigeria adopted a non-alignment policy. However, the country was evidently pro-West in its conduct of its foreign relations. This was easy to explain considering the fact that British influence remained strong in Nigeria in spite of the granting of independence. Up to sixty percent of Nigeria's external trade was with Britain, from where more than half of its foreign direct investment came. In addition, almost all of Nigeria's arms procurement came from Britain.

Nigeria's economic, political, and military attachment to Britain reduced in the course of the Nigerian Civil War because Britain declined to sell much-needed arms to Nigeria during the war, but Britain bounced back to maintain special relationship with Nigeria shortly after the war. Thus, in the 1970s, Nigeria remained pro-West in spite of being at the other side of the divide in the Angolan crisis (Aworawo, 2003, pp. 138-142). Under these circumstances, the influence of a number of socialist countries, notably the USSR, and Cuba on Equatorial Guinea negatively affected relations between Equatorial Guinea and Nigeria. At one level, the USSR came to maintain a „big brother“ position in its relations with Equatorial Guinea. This was a position Nigeria understood well, as it had traditionally maintained such a relationship with smaller African states, creating the conditions for special relations between Nigeria and those nations. At another level,

however, the socialist influence in Equatorial Guinea made it difficult for Equatorial Guinea to be committed to pan-Africanism, a movement that promoted good intra-African relations. Moreover, Nigeria's adoption of the non-alignment policy and closeness to the West put her at an ideologically different position than Equatorial Guinea.

The impact of the Cold War environment on relations between Nigeria and Equatorial Guinea could be appreciated from some of the actions taken by the president of Equatorial Guinea, Obiang Nguema Mbasogo, in 1979 and the early 1980s as he reshaped the direction of his country's relations. As already noted, Obiang was desirous of maintaining very special relations with Nigeria and other African states. He also wanted his country to be close to Spain and other Western countries that had given the government financial and technical assistance shortly after he overthrew Macias. He was conscious of the fact that Soviet influence in Equatorial Guinea would need to be reduced for such a foreign policy structure to be realized. One of the earliest steps taken relates to Obiang Nguema's refusal to renew an agreement which gave the Soviet Union exclusive rights to fish in Equatorial Guinea's waters and control over the port of Luba island when it expired in 1979. Other measures were also taken to ensure that Equatorial Guinea was no longer going to be used as a military transit territory (Liniger-Goumaz, 1989, p. 96). Of course, Cold War pressure on Equatorial Guinea disappeared after 1989, when the assertive interventionism that characterized the Cold War vanished with it. In many respects, therefore, the end of the Cold War positively influenced relations between Equatorial Guinea and Nigeria. It removed pressure on the leaders of Equatorial Guinea and provided the freedom to conduct external relations in line with what was perceived as the country's national interest.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the pattern of Nigerian-Equatorial Guinean relations from 1980 to 2005 and has also brought to the fore the major changes that occurred in their relations. Internal political changes in Nigeria and Equatorial Guinea and the commitment of their leaders to promote closer ties positively affected relations. Equatorial Guinea's shift from dependence on cocoa to oil, which made dependence on Nigerian migrant labor unnecessary, also promoted cordial relations and reduced the cases of brutalization of Nigerians in Equatorial Guinea's cocoa plantations, which was a major source of irritation to the Nigerian government. The end of the Cold War in 1989 and the abolishing of apartheid as a state policy in South Africa in 1994 equally contributed to the cordial relations that developed between Nigeria and Equatorial Guinea in the quarter of a century from 1980. However, the ill-treatment of Nigerians in Equatorial Guinea that continued in the 1980s and 1990s remained a thorny issue in relations between both countries.

Nigeria and Equatorial Guinea have quite a lot in common. Both countries are neighbors with overlapping maritime claims, and both produce large quantities of oil and gas. Also, as members of the African Union, Nigeria and Equatorial Guinea necessarily interact closely. What remains to be seen is whether the pattern of interactions will be cordial or conflictual. The analysis of the changing patterns of Nigerian-Equatorial Guinean relations in the quarter of a century studied in this work reveals that a fairly

stable political system with a measure of moderate and rational leadership contributed to better relations from the 1980s compared to previous decades. This was evident in the pattern of relations after the overthrow of Macias Nguema in Equatorial Guinea in 1979 and during the administrations of Shehu Shagari (1979-1983), Ibrahim Babangida (1985-1993), and Olusegun Obasanjo (1999-2007) in Nigeria (Aworawo, 2003, pp. 387-407). The study thus corroborates the view that democratic governance not committed to extreme ideological positions tends to promote good diplomatic relations.

The research has also revealed that the structure of the international system at different times affects bilateral relations among states. A related issue is that with sound policies, states can adjust their external relations in accordance with the prevailing external environment to promote good relations. While it is true that conflict is sometimes inevitable when addressing some international issues, it is also true that states with sound policies and commitments to the use of diplomacy in addressing international issues may reduce their involvement in conflict to the barest minimum. This was revealed in the negotiations (1996-2000) that led to the delimitation of the maritime boundaries between Nigeria and Equatorial Guinea between 1996 and 2000. What remains to be done is for both countries to keep faith with the many bilateral agreements that they have signed. They would also need to seek further ways of cooperation in areas such as technical cooperation, educational exchanges, and social and cultural cooperation. In this way, avenues for further cordial relations would be made possible in the future.

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