

NOTES ON NIGERIA-BRITISH RELATIONS, 1960-2011

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ABSTRACT

Research into the major ingredients of Nigeria-British relations is not a show piece of an hour. Its complexities are not only deep, but ubiquitous. Starting from Nigerian's independence in 1960, her relationship with its former colonial master has transcended convoluted periods of congenial and difficult experiences. Taking a position on what would likely be the nucleus of Nigeria-British relations demands at least a basic knowledge of the historical antecedents that connected the peoples of both entities, pre-1960. From the status of trading partnership, Nigeria was exploited and dominated. This macabre of British imperialism practically pervaded all aspects of the Nigerian psyche. After Nigeria's independence, more than fifty years ago, the diplomatic phase of "close cordiality" somehow still maintains the Union Jack's cloak over Nigeria. This study is set to re-examine the pedestal of such relations, so as to rekindle constructive thoughts, awareness and knowledge, in order to help re-direct and galvanize a proper Nigerian vision.

INTRODUCTION

A proper evaluation of Nigeria-British relations must first acknowledge that both countries are sovereign, hence possess separate foreign policies, which at least must accommodate basic separate selfish attributes and objectives. On such rests the covert and overt, tangible and intangible, thrust of policy it is likely to pursue, viz: imperialistic/expansionist/aggressive; humanitarian/selfless; ambivalent/opportunistic; defensive, or what has been styled the foreign policy of neutralized states.¹

It is only when such choices have been made that foreign policy instruments—diplomacy, propaganda, economics, military power and war—could be adopted and channelled towards achieving, protecting and promoting national interest. Suffice it then to say that states pursue their foreign policy in order to protect and promote identified national interests, which include domestic conditions, problems and worries.² Subsequently, the interaction of any two states must be through the implementation of their separate foreign policies.

Be that as it many, owing to the nature and demands of this study, one may reflect a bit further on certain determinants that generally influence the formulation and implementation of foreign policy of nations and countries. The internal factors include:

economy, religious inclination, national interest, population, size, location, public opinion, leadership, ideological/psychological factor, mode of independence, military strength and domestic politics. External factors include: international law and organization, current developments in the international arena, colonialism, and geographical location.

Since independence, Nigerian foreign policy has largely pivoted on the following cardinal principles: Afrocentrism, nonalignment, equality of all states, good neighbourliness, League of Big Brotherhood, and globalization. On the other hand, British foreign policy has since 1945 abandoned empiedom and the incipient policy of unilateralism, in order to seek closer ties with Europe and the United States of America. Unfolding numerous global trends made British foreign policy aim towards the following: enriching and strengthening its economy, keeping its military strength in proportion to its resources, sustenance of political influence in ex-colonies through large scale investment, supporting democracy/global democratic institutions, supporting stability and order in global issues, and playing a leading role on the European continent. One may not be wrong to observe that British foreign policy still follows Winston Churchill's age long three-circle strategy: special relationship with the United States, the Commonwealth of Nations, and Western Europe.³

Back in history, imperial Britain's interest had succinctly rested on the economy, though it always hid under the facade of diplomacy to doggedly achieve this. As Lord Palmerston once said, "Britain has no external allies and no eternal enemies; Britain's interests are eternal and these interests it is our duty to follow".⁴ The summation of British foreign policy since 1945 has been an exercise in adjustment; from a paramount global power to just a partner-position of the Anglo-American alliance and the European Union. As a linchpin of British security and continued global recognition, it had to adjust and rather maintain its status as a medium power, with much hope on the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO).

Undoubtedly, Britain created Nigeria through an interplay of tactile, tangled, guile and violent forces. When the British amalgamated both the Southern and Northern protectorates in 1914, the colonial contraption called Nigeria was born. Nigeria's status plummeted from a superordinate to a subordinate one.⁵ Britain subsequently dominated Nigeria politically, economically, socially and otherwise. This leverage gave Britain the strategic opportunity to wholesomely imbibe into the Nigerian society the foundation for future dependence and attachment.⁶ Suffice it to then reflect that even at independence by 1960, British apron strings on Nigeria were so strong that the latter even failed to exploit the instant global window that opened. It would nonetheless be an exaggeration to tag Nigerian foreign policy immediately after 1960 as simply pro-British.

However, the scenario appears different today. Many factors, internal and external—the declining British global power; Nigeria's growing democracy, including her influential position in African and global affairs; the symmetrical Sino-European-American interests focused presently on the Nigerian economy—have all gone a long way in influencing and tickling the interest of scholars, commentators, politicians and foreign policy makers. It is a historical fact that Britain was Nigeria's former colonial master; in the same vein, one cannot divorce the unquestionable reality of how close almost all aspects of the independent Nigeria nation has been knitted into the economic diplomacy in a neo-colonial setting. Nigeria and Britain are not symbiotically bonded and can never be; but both could very well pass as sovereign players on a plain field, imbued with unequal experience, status, advantages, understanding, tact and vision.

This dependent relationship over the years post-1960 has steadily and gradually loosened its grip, sequel to both domestic and international developments undergone by both nations. For proper and in-depth understanding, British-Nigerian relationship could be categorized into historical, socio-cultural, political and economical parlances. Within these categorization is infused all other aspects that tie both countries on the Commonwealth platform and strategic military angle.

DEPENDENCY

The Nigerian economy is still largely a neo-colonial one, Euro-American dominated. The primary aim of a neo-colonial arrangement is the maintenance of the former colony as a dependent, as a controlled source of raw materials, as well as a market for investments and the sale of goods manufactured in the metropolitan country.⁷ When this conclusion is watered down, Nigeria's dependency could be traced emphatically to every facet of its existence, starting from its historical, socio-economic, education and even military background:

- Dependence on crude oil dealt a death blow on prospective agricultural proceeds and, *ipso facto*, reduced Nigeria to a mono-economy, with its attendant international oil fluctuations and manipulations of transnational oil corporations. New Western-oriented life styles and consumption patterns helped to streamline the country to the depredations of international banks and financial institutions.
- Ever increasing dominance of advanced sectors of the Nigerian economy by foreign companies, directly or indirectly. Even where certain companies and productive complexes are established within the country, these plants are fabricated and moulded to conform and work with only raw materials mixed and packaged overseas. Furthermore, basic designs, maintenance, spare parts etc, are never indigenous.

- There is a continuous creation and maintenance of a "powerful local comprador" group (politicians, bureaucrats, bankers, etc), who are remotely used to guarantee the continuous dependence of Nigeria on specific dominant foreign interest and powers.

Undoubtedly, this scenario has compromised Nigeria's autonomy and political independence largely, in that economic developmental policies could well pass as mere paper work, justifying melancholic idealism, devoid of abject reality. The foreign policy of any nation is packaged and unleashed only when such an entity is not only independent, but officially has an emergent indigent government. It was under such a heavy cloud of dependence that, as Oddih opines:

Dictated and directed by the colonial masters [Britain], through the colonial office in London, what constituted Nigerian's foreign policy were principally the interest, goals, wishes and aspirations of the colonial masters... Thus Nigeria's national interest emerged as the goal of Nigeria's foreign policy on attainment of independence in 1960⁸

The above information has set out indelible parameters towards analyzing the time picture of the linkage between Nigeria and Britain. As Adeniran has affirmed, apart from the cash crops and minerals which Nigeria was made to be supplying to numerous British industries at home, this newly independent nation was equally tailored to depend on British finished goods for a living.⁹ It is necessary to recall that there was a far-reaching British economic decimation of the Nigerian enclave pre- and post independence through the activities of their numerous firms and companies, like the United African Company (UAC), and John Holt. Moreover, the Nigerian oil sector did not escape the same British economic masturbation, in that by 1914, the British Government had in place a Minerals Act, empowering them to manage all oil and gas concessions within present-day Nigeria. Subsequently, by early 1950, when oil was struck in the Niger Delta region, Shell BP ably represented the British exploitative conduit pipe.

One may have to explain that in trying to cast back and recollect certain important decisions and developments that took place pre-1960 within what is today called Nigeria, this study intends to create a much needed historical flashback, so as to provide a veritable probe and evaluation on the present. Be that as it may, even if Nigeria's independence was largely circumscribed by the dominance of British economic interests,¹⁰ this *status quo* does not very well hold water today. Britain's continued slide into international residualdom did affect most of its companies and firms which used to control the commanding heights of Nigerian economy. Hence most of them have either gone moribund or are no longer major players in the Nigerian economy. One must add though that British oil companies still controls almost half of Nigeria's oil production and export.¹¹

Besides dominating Nigeria's economy, Britain exerted much political influence on independent Nigeria. Under British guidance, for instance, post-independence Nigeria adopted the British legal system and its parliamentary system of government. The adoption of the American-modelled presidential system of government in the late 1970s is however a indication that, occasionally, independent Nigeria takes important decisions independently.

COMMONWEALTH PLATFORM

The Commonwealth of Nations, as an international organization, is another important barometer through which Nigeria-British relations could be assessed. Most member countries are those formerly colonized by Britain, hence its assumption of symbolic leadership of this organization. Member counties are fully independent: homogenously, they are bonded through history, language and other similar institutions. Put simply, as a moral force, the Commonwealth Organization

... addresses problems and conflicts within member states, offers a framework for informal consultation, economic and scientific assistance, bilateral and multilateral ties, cultural cooperation and exchange, sports, educational, training and scholarship programmes, etc¹²

This organization may lack the tenacity of purpose expected from such an international club, but an in-depth scrutiny of its age-long influence on Nigeria may be quite revealing.

MILITARY RELATIONS

Obviously, a great level of strategic military contact and understanding exists between Nigeria and Britain. Historically, the Nigerian Army evolved from the Royal West African Frontier Force, which was British Empire's adopted tool in the defence of and maintenance of law and order in its colonies in West Africa. At independence in 1960, Britain adopted the special role of orientation, training and equipping the Nigerian Army, Police and State Security Services etc. Post-independence Nigerian Security Department had preference for British training institutions at Aldershot and Sandhorst¹³, including the use of British military hardware.

SOCIO-CULTURAL RELATIONS

Perhaps the last pivot of Nigeria-British relationship could be what appears like a double-faceted emotive historical synthesis-cum-status linkage still binding Nigeria and Britain. Before independence, almost all departments of Nigeria's developmental strides toed the British formative system e.g. fashion, values, tastes, academic and professional status.

With due apologies to the Nigerian psyche and pride, one could say that Britain was then the model nation. Nigeria, according to records, has a significant community in the United Kingdom, while the London-Lagos air route is still one of the busiest in Nigerian aviation business.¹⁴ Existing immigration data in the United Kingdom has it that as of July 2011 “[t]he UK is home to roughly 1 million people with family ties to Nigeria, and members of the Nigerian Diaspora play an important and valuable role in the UK’s economy and society, contributing to financial services, and even football”. From whatever pedestal one may decide to view it, apart from the outcome of the significant British institutional presence in Nigeria through the activities of, for example, the British Council, the deep-seated urge to visit or migrate to Britain amongst Nigerians is not waning at all.

REFLECTIONS

It may not be totally out of place to observe that notable studies done on Nigeria–British relations manifest a contemporary historical shortfall. Consequently, this study prefers to evaluate the summation of their pendulous relationship on the following milestones: Commonwealth relations, Anglo/Nigerian Defence Pact, British manipulations during the Nigerian civil war, British response to Nigerian leader’s economic profligacy and incipient fugitive extradition drama, the British response to Nigeria’s leadership role in the activities of the ECOMOG project, British subtlety in the Nigerian-Cameroon (Bakassi) dispute, and British exploitative activities in the Niger-Delta.

Nigeria is a sovereign entity, the most populous black nation in the world. It is blessed with prospective economic infrastructure and a fast growing consumer population. A regional and continental power, it has varied chances to achieve global leadership. On the other hand, Britain, a previous dominant global giant, relatively descending into residualdom both in Europe and in the world, is still commanding a measurable level of international influence and diplomacy. Both Nigeria and Britain have the inheritable right and choice to decide which country to relate with and how. It appears, though, that what steers the trend of both nations’ relationship are rooted in history and status. Britain is a developed country and former Nigeria’s colonial master, while Nigeria is an undeveloped economy with a third world rating. Both countries’ interests can never be the same.

We will now discuss the milestones in Nigeria-British relations mentioned above:

The benefits in Nigeria’s continued membership of the Commonwealth appear more glaring sequel to the myriad of developmental, educational, social, political aid and assistance flowing from that organization to Nigeria. The Commonwealth offers Nigeria

significant technical support to improve her economic infrastructure, which Nigeria needs in her effort to become an industrialized nation and, ultimately, one of the twenty leading global economies in 2020.¹⁶ Be that as it may, Nigeria should always be ready to balance its losses against its gains in the Commonwealth. In tandem with this stance, Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, Nigeria's first Prime Minister, once stated:

Nigeria would feel very free to select those policies which she considered to be in her interest despite her relationship with the Commonwealth ... that Nigeria would not play [a] subordinate role to member nations of the organization.¹⁷

Both Britain and Nigeria have at different times tried to use the Commonwealth to put diplomatic pressure on each other. For instance, in 1995, following the much celebrated "Hanging of the Ogoni Nine" in spite of international pleas for clemency, Britain vehemently and effectively manipulated the Commonwealth to condemn the executions, expel Nigeria from the organization, and apply sanctions against her.¹⁸ On the other hand, in the 1970s and 1980s, Nigeria used the platform of the Commonwealth to condemn British support for the Apartheid minority government in South Africa.

As stated above, post-independence Nigeria had preference for British military hardware. A new freedom came when certain American and Soviet inventions and advances made Nigeria diversify its sources of arms, especially as it became clear that Britain had lost the edge in military technology. Nigeria's assertiveness in her defence relations with Britain was manifested early in the post-independence period, when Nigeria abrogated the Anglo-Nigerian Defence Pact (1962).¹⁸

3. British policy towards Nigeria during the latter's civil war was unbecoming of a country that had had a close relationship with the warring nation. As a former colonial master, Britain should have vehemently preached for, and insisted on, a peaceful resolution to the conflict, rather than waging a propaganda war against secessionist Biafra and supplying weapons and intelligence to the Federal side during the conflict. At least, one would have expected the British government to make sure that the agreement reached by both belligerent parties at Aburi, Ghana in January 1967 was fully implemented. That would have prevented the outbreak of war.
4. Not until the former Governor James O. Ibori's case and his subsequent conviction by a British court (2011) has there been formal British co-operation with Nigeria towards checking state corruption, money laundering, and investment of stolen Nigerian money in Britain. Stashing stolen money in British banks by corrupt Nigerian officials had long been tolerated, even welcomed, by the British government. Sincere efforts at

extraditing such money from Britain by Nigeria had always failed. Sadly, even though Britain welcomes money criminally made in Nigeria, it is not so accommodating of Nigerian criminals in Britain. Indeed, there is reason to believe that Britain discriminates against Nigerians in crime control. As reported by Eke,

In February 2009 alone, about 400 out of 1000 Nigerian prisoner in British jail were repatriated to Nigeria from Britain. The rate is alarming and leaves a source of great concern for the Nigeria government under her citizen diplomacy to strive to ascertain the authenticity of the claims against her nationals in Britain, to avoid the image damaging consequences in the nation.¹⁹

5. During the ECOMOG activities in West Africa, Nigeria felt completely betrayed by Britain, sequel to extant logistic and tactical support, though that project enjoyed the blessing of the United Nations. Rather, Britain joined forces with another European power, suggesting the institution of an alternative African Rapid Response Peacekeeping group.
6. All through the Nigerian-Cameroon (Bakassi) dispute at the International Court of Justice, Hague, Britain, probably following a script prepared by European countries, refrained from strongly backing and defending its 1884 Treaty of Protection over the Bakassi Peninsular. In contrast, France, Cameroon's colonial master, strongly supported Cameroon. It is arguable that French support to Cameroon, coupled with Britain's indifference, enabled Cameroon to win the case at The Hague, on 10 October, 2002.
7. Both Nigeria and Britain see each other as key international economic partners: according to the United Kingdom's High commissioner, Nigeria is a priority country.²⁰ Although the proportion of British investments in Nigeria has declined vis-à-vis other developed countries, it is still substantial. Britain's most valuable investments are in oil and gas, which are concentrated in the Niger Delta. Hence Britain heavily sided with the federal government. It called the militant activities of Niger Delta youths acts of "lawlessness", and offered a helping hand in the training of Nigerian security forces and others to build up their capacity to deal with this problem.²¹ In defending and buttressing their strong position and reasoning, the then Deputy British High Commissioner to Nigeria, James Tansley, stated that the security threat in the Niger Delta had affected global oil prices and indeed, the global economy, and so "demand[ed] collective solution... with international partners".²² This shows that Britain was merely concerned with its economic interests. It did not bother about the injustices the peoples of the Niger Delta were struggling to redress.

CONCLUSION

Nigeria and Britain are key international partners. As the British High Commissioner to Nigeria stated recently:

Trade and business links between Nigeria and the United Kingdom increased by 67% from 2007 to 2009. Nigeria is an increasingly important market for British companies, and the U.K. is one of the largest investors in Nigeria, in sectors from oil and gas to financial services, to agriculture. In 2010, U.K.'s bilateral aid to Nigeria rose from £140 million per annum.²³

The facts in the above quotation show that both Nigeria and Britain need each other, though they are at different stages of their historical and economic development. The dynamic dialectics of continuity of change and choice in life is in support of foreign cooperation and relations. Nigeria, still a developing democracy, with lots of untapped resources (human and material), has a lot to gain from looking to the British example. However, the old must not be allowed to prey on the young to maintain longevity. Any attempt to correct the imbalance existent in Nigeria's relations with Britain must first start from the psyche. Liberation from mental slavery will embolden the Nigerian leadership to be versatile and jettison all attributes that may marginalize its global ventures. Both countries need to dialogue on issues of mutual respect, such that the adoption of externally oriented policies that serve foreign interests rather than the indigenous populace will stop. The federal government should try to stop the British Council's activities that promote brain-drain from Nigeria. Moreover, designated authorities should mount pressure on British oil firms to stop their exploitative activities in the Niger Delta, activities that damage the environment and dehumanize the peoples of the area. The Nigerian government should stand up to them, and stop compromising the life of its citizens.

NOTES

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