

# Constructing Pax Nigeriana? The Media and Conflict in Nigeria-Equatorial Guinea Relations

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## ABSTRACT

The paper discusses the reasons for tension between Nigeria and Equatorial Guinea over the past decades. Although the presence of the Nigerian labour force in Equatorial Guinea has been considered the principal source of tension, the paper argues that power politics should not be excluded. The relatively weak position of Equatorial Guinea as a neighbour of populous and wealthy Nigeria might have significant contribution to the foreign policy practised by the former. The analysis of the Nigerian media, especially the writings in the Nigerian newspapers and magazines, shows its dual role of mirroring, and at the same time influencing, a particular reality. (Ed.)

*Keywords: Nigeria, Equatorial Guinea, conflict, power politics*

## INTRODUCTION

For more than six decades<sup>1</sup>, beginning from the late 1920s, sporadic conflicts punctuated relations between Nigeria and Equatorial Guinea, one of the three main groups of neighbours lying along the Atlantic coastline near Nigeria. These regular diplomatic rows resulted from the alleged maltreatment of Nigerian labourers, a sizeable workforce in Malabo. As such, relations between the two countries continued to oscillate between measured friendship and outright animosity, despite the existence of a series of industrial pacts<sup>2</sup>. Arguably the most serious of such diplomatic spats occurred in January 1976 when soldiers of the National Guard, apparently acting on the orders of President Macias Nguema, attacked some Nigerian labourers who had taken refuge in the Nigerian embassy in Malabo. This attack resulted in eleven deaths (Goumaz 1988: 59; **Sunday Times**, January 11<sup>th</sup> 1976, p. 1). Following this unfortunate incident, matters appeared again in 1988 to have reached an unanticipated crescendo when it was discovered that Equatorial Guinea had allowed the then-

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<sup>1</sup> Nigerian labourers had started emigrating to Fernando Po as early as 1927 as a result of the Spanish failure to procure labour from the Cameroons, Liberia, and even China.

<sup>2</sup> Between 1942 and 1974 alone there were eight such agreements.

apartheid regime in South Africa a foothold on its territory (**NewsWatch**, May 23<sup>rd</sup> 1988, May 30<sup>th</sup> 1988; **African Concord**, February 3<sup>rd</sup> 1987).

This discovery heightened the diplomatic temperature (especially in Lagos), which did not begin to cool off until the mid-1990s.<sup>3</sup> In retrospect, the showdown over the presence of South Africa in Malabo helped indeed to serve as an eye-opener. Up till then, it had been customary to consider disagreement over purely labour matters as the root cause of persistent tension in relation between Nigeria and her comparatively weaker neighbour.<sup>4</sup> After the South African episode however, this explanation became clearly inadequate. In any case, there was no cogent justification for the noticeable predilection of the Equatorial Guineans to seek refuge under the political umbrella of successive foreign powers, of which the South Africans were only the latest, and most provocative, addition.<sup>5</sup>

One plausible explanation has been the fear of domination, if not complete annexation by Nigeria, which was felt by Equatorial Guinea. The sources of this phobia were quite obvious. Even though Nigerian labourers were treated as second-class citizens in Malabo, relations between Nigeria and Equatorial-Guinea had been skewed *ab initio*. It would seem in retrospect that the authorities in Malabo had lived in continuous fear of their much bigger and stronger neighbour. But then events which had followed in the wake of every row could only have served to deepen the already existing fear. We refer here to the constant clamour for the annexation of the country by a vocal section of the Nigerian public. In this regard, it was argued that since Nigerian labour had built up the economy of Equatorial Guinea, it was only logical that it, i.e. Equatorial Guinea, should make working conditions for Nigerian labourers more humane, failing which the Nigerian authorities should “annex that island” (**Daily Times**, January 26<sup>th</sup> 1976, p. 1). Notably, this irredentism enjoyed particular ventilation in the press, where both private and government-owned publications forged an unusual consensus.

Until now this dimension to the conflict in Nigeria-Equatorial Guinea relations has attracted negligible research attention. Thus, the main intention of the present study is to fill this curious void in the literature by determining the extent to which the Nigerian press stoked the embers of annexation and thus increased tension in relations between the two countries. This task is imperative for several other reasons. First, there is no doubt that Nigeria prides itself as the “giant of Africa”, a mentality which has continued to frame the country’s external behaviour. Successive Nigerian leaders have harped on a certain providential scheme that presumably puts the country ahead of the entire black

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<sup>3</sup> By then the military regime in Nigeria had embarked on a series of calculated moves intended to wean Equatorial Guinea away from the embrace of the regime in South Africa.

<sup>4</sup> This is the main thesis of, for example, Osuntokun (1978).

<sup>5</sup> Before then, Equatorial Guinea’s strategic location had made her the favourite bride of various powers such as Spain, France, Russia, and the United States.

race. Thus, it will be interesting to see the extent to which the media's attitude towards Equatorial Guinea was informed by this mentality, and also how far the same 'ideology' shaped both its perception and the reality it consequently constructed. Second, and as a corollary, it is equally important to show the extent to which the image of Equatorial Guinea that has sedimented in the Nigerian public consciousness over time depends in large measure on the reality constructed by the media. Finally, the present study will also provide a proper intellectual canvas for a reconsideration of the theoretical place of the media in the mediation and reflection of social reality.

## 1. FRAMEWORK FOR ANALYSIS

The press remains one of the most important landmarks in any given social landscape. This importance is rightly underscored by the respect, almost bordering on awe, with which other sectors of society regard it. In most cases, the source of this reverence usually lies in the recognition of the role of the press in shaping public consciousness. True enough, either wittingly or otherwise, people in most countries tend to depend heavily on media articulation as a formal guide to any particular issue. Perhaps there is no greater illustration of the gravity with which the press is regarded than the feverish attention it usually receives from the authorities in less open societies. Here, the censor is an omnipresent reality and virtually dictates what the media let out as information. The role of the press is no less crucial within the category of civil society, where it helps to provide the desired coverage of the activities of various constituent organisations.

Still, it would be unwise on account of the preceding, to come to any hasty conclusions about the media, especially with regard to its role in the construction of social reality in general or of any given reality, for that matter. The point is that while the media continues to reflect a reality, it also continues to exist as a part of that same reality. In addition, the media may also reflect a certain reality in such a way as to accommodate its own conviction about it. Having done this, it naturally succeeds in shaping or altering the perceptions of the public, many of whom usually take the essential accuracy of its reports for granted. In this, the highest level of veneration is perhaps to be found in foreign policy matters around which the policy-making elite appears to have thrown a *cordon sanitaire*. Although in recent times general public interest in foreign affairs has been further stimulated by the increased access to advanced means of communication, there is little doubt that a revolution in public attitudes is still a long way off.

In the construction of reality, the media usually employs a variety of techniques.<sup>6</sup> These vary from imposing its own narrow definition on the given reality, setting apart a certain aspect of the event for deliberate emphasis, or even in some cases, blocking it from view by being silent on it. Of course the import of the employment of all these devices is that the media itself remains constantly conscious of the reality it constructs because it is aware of its existence as a category within a defined social space. Whatever the case may be, there is little doubt that over time, as Lance Bennett (1988) has rightly noted; 'political reality' eventually becomes what the media says it is. In the case of relations between Nigeria and Equatorial Guinea, our thesis here is that the reality that the media created and sustained fell within the ambit of a hegemonic 'ideology'. As such, in speaking and entertaining a language of violence and ultra-nationalism, the media simultaneously accepted and constructed a reality which reified a particular mental disposition by most Nigerians towards a 'recalcitrant' neighbour. A brief outline of the pedigree and contents of this 'ideology' is in order at this juncture.

## 2. THE 'IDEOLOGY' OF MANIFEST DESTINY: A BRIEF DISCOURSE ON SOURCES AND ARTICULATIONS

The notion that Nigeria was destined to lead the African continent and champion the cause of blacks all over the world actually predates its attainment of independence in 1960. This conviction has remained strong almost forty years after independence. More ironically, in the past, its most strident articulations have remarkably coincided with periods of social and political stress when national morale was expected to touch its lowest ebb. Perhaps the explanation for this tenacity is to be found in the national role conception which most Nigerians, including the political elite, have about the country.<sup>7</sup> The sources of this conception are obvious enough and relate to the country's often-repeated demographic preponderance, its economic and natural endowments, and its staggering human resources (Fawole 1993: 15-20). In any case, they only corroborate Holsti's postulation that the role conception is usually a function of several factors, including

Location and major topographical features of the state; natural, economic and technical resources, available capabilities; traditional policies; socio-economic demands and needs as expressed through political parties, mass movements or interest groups; national values, doctrines or ideologies; public opinion 'mood'; and the personality or political needs of key policy makers. (Holsti 1970: 246)

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<sup>6</sup> This, apparently, has been an ongoing concern for scholars. See, for example, Tuchman (1978) and Altschull (1994).

<sup>7</sup> This is explained in detail in Fawole (1993).

If the sources of Nigeria's leadership mentality are apparent enough, political leaders have always emphasised it to clinch their arguments. Often it is the mantra normally appealed to as a technique of patriotic mobilisation. At such times it may even be necessary to situate the country within the context of a grand cosmic vision. For example, Professor Eyo Ita, a First Republic politician quoted in Ojiako (1981: 12), once famously reminded the country's youths that:

He is the God of Nigeria, her abiding genius, her sustaining power. The youth must realise that it is serving His cause through the activities of its movement. It must realise that the whole of Nigeria is of supreme value before God, and that its creative work is part of the vast plan of the Divine Conserver of our values.

In the same vein the speeches and pronouncements of other politicians and nationalists in the same period often contained direct references to the same putative uniqueness. Not even narrow party allegiances were sufficient to temper this conviction. Two relevant quotations from two different politicians will suffice to drive home this point. First, addressing a public gathering in London on July 31, 1959, two months before the country's independence, Nnamdi Azikiwe, soon to become its first President, contended that "it should be the *manifest destiny* of Nigeria to join hands with other progressive forces in the world in order to emancipate not only the people of Africa but also other peoples of African descent from the scourge of colonialism..." (Azikiwe 1961: 64). The second relevant quotation is Prime Minister Abubakar Tafawa Balewa's put-down of Kwame Nkrumah's advocacy of a political union of African states. The Prime Minister claimed that "Nigeria is big enough and does not need to join others... if others wish to join Nigeria, their position would be made clear to them in such a union" (quoted in Phillips 1964: 90).

As indicated earlier, even the press was not immune to this frenetic hyper-nationalism, a fact which seems to query the assumption of a constantly opposed press and state. In actual fact, in the case of the media's portrayal of the dynamics of relations between Nigeria and Equatorial Guinea, not only did the state and the Fourth Estate appear to speak with one voice, but even the usually muted divergence between state and privately owned news organs disappeared completely. In the section that follows, we will examine the different techniques used by the media to concretise to this mentality. In doing this, we will, where necessary, provide additional background information on the specifics of Nigeria-Equatorial Guinea relations.

### 3. THE MEDIA AND THE HEGEMONIC IMPULSE

It is necessary to preface this section of the paper with some remarks about the period under focus itself. For Nigeria and Equatorial Guinea, the mid-1970s

kicked off a different phase in relations, albeit one marked by a certain intensity. This intensity reached a dramatic climax in May 1988 when Nigeria discovered that its smaller neighbour had engaged the services of South African military officials who were establishing a military base in Bioko<sup>8</sup>. This nascent intensity was occasioned by some factors, the most prominent of which were the persistent intervention in purely labour matters by Guinean militians, the stiffening of official repression under Obiang Mbasogo who toppled Macias Nguema in 1979, and the heightened nationalist consciousness in Nigeria. This new situation was played out in a series of incidents which brought relations to an all-time low.

The successive flare-ups provided a context for the Nigerian press to articulate its annexationist agenda. This was done using different, though complementary, methods. In the first instance, different newspapers wrote strong-minded editorials intended to force the hands of the Nigerian authorities to take a hard stance against the ‘fascist’ regime in Equatorial Guinea. Most of the editorials saw nothing wrong in moving militarily against a regime that had the temerity to bite the finger of the big brother that had always fed it and nurtured its economy. In none of them could the hegemonic condescension be concealed.

This was clearly the case, for example, following the incident of January 7<sup>th</sup> 1976, when over-zealous Equatorial Guinean militia men stormed the Nigerian embassy in Malabo, killing eleven Nigerians who had sought refuge within its premises (**Sunday Times**, January 11<sup>th</sup> 1976, p. 1; Goumaz 1988: 59). The unfortunate incident provoked an outrage in the Nigerian press whose passion was easily betrayed by the headings of its editorial comments.<sup>9</sup> The **Sunday Chronicle**’s editorial of January 18<sup>th</sup> 1976 clearly encapsulated the prevailing mood when it referred to the regime of President Macias Nguema as ‘fascist’, and described the incident itself as “the worst in an unbroken chain of provocation meted out to Nigerians in Equatorial Guinea”.<sup>10</sup> The paper insisted:

Quite frankly, the days of quiet diplomacy with Equatorial Guinea are gone, now is the time to demonstrate our fury. For too long, previous governments have acted as toothless bulldogs in similar circumstances... we insist that we stop this fascist. It’s either co-existence or no existence. Action now! (Ibid.)

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<sup>8</sup> The import of the South African presence was not lost on Lagos, then engaged in a running battle with the former over its apartheid policy. Bioko, the island part of Equatorial Guinea, is strategically located in relation to Nigeria. For more on this, see, for example, Imobighe (1897), and Akinrinade (1998).

<sup>9</sup> The following is a revealing sampler: “*Enough is Enough*”, **New Nigerian** January 14<sup>th</sup> 1976; “*Time for Reprisal*”, **Nigerian Chronicle**, January 12<sup>th</sup> 1976; “*Bring Them Home*”, **Nigerian Standard**, January 12<sup>th</sup> 1976; and “*Barbaric Act*”, **Daily Sketch**, January 14<sup>th</sup> 1976.

<sup>10</sup> See “*Stop This Fascist*”, **Sunday Chronicle**, January 18<sup>th</sup> 1976.

There is every reason to suspect that the general passion whipped up by a cross-section of the media directly influenced the course of action taken by the Murtala Muhammed government which, amid the deafening nationalist clamour, would not have liked to be perceived as weak or indecisive. At the end of the day, the action taken by the federal military government was hardly commensurate with the original misdemeanour of Equatorial Guinea. Thus, when the government ordered the evacuation of all Nigerians resident in Equatorial Guinea, including non-treaty labourers, it employed not only its merchant, navy, but also gunboats and air force planes to demonstrate its resolve. In addition, General Muhammed also mobilised the 13<sup>th</sup> amphibious brigade, Calabar, to occupy the island of Bioko, which was only narrowly saved by the assassination of General Muhammed himself in an abortive military putsch in February 1976 (**The Guardian**, May 13<sup>th</sup> 1988, p. 6).

At other times, the post-rupture media hysteria reaches an alarming crescendo in which outright demands for annexation are made. This was the case, for instance, after the diplomatic showdown that followed the discovery of the South African presence in Bioko. Thus, amid the ensuing outbreak of animosity, newspapers openly urged the Nigerian authorities to “make Malabo Nigeria’s 22<sup>nd</sup> State” (**Daily Times**, July 12<sup>th</sup> 1988).

Of course, all this did very little to assuage the worst fears of the Equatorial Guinean authorities, who legitimately read irredentism in every step taken by Nigeria. For example, when the Muhammed regime mobilised formidable naval and air power to demonstrate the resolve of Lagos in evacuating Nigerians from Equatorial Guinea, the action was misconstrued by President Macias Nguema and top members of his cabinet, who promptly went into hiding (**The Guardian**, May 13<sup>th</sup> 1988). On the whole, the overall consequence of the Nigerian media’s pugnacity has been to drive Equatorial Guinea into the arms of other foreign powers, many of whom, seeing the obvious economic and military advantages, accept it only too willingly. At one point, the most prominent of such foreign allies was France, which was able to secure large contracts for construction works. The Soviet Union, too, apparently unswayed by the socialist rhetoric of the clique in power, lost little time in pillaging the marine resources of Equatorial Guinea’s waters in exchange for a few military advisers and in using the port of San Carlos as a staging post to supply the Angolan battle front (Goumaz 1988: 117-118). Much later, even Cuba and China joined the fray, although it was the dangerous flirtation with racist South Africa that finally incurred the wrath of the authorities in Lagos.

At other times, the Nigerian media simply gave ample space to opinion pieces from members of the public, the tenor of which also favoured the hegemonic ‘project’. Two excerpts from some of these will help illustrate our argument. Writing after the 1976 killings, a public commentator in the **Daily Times** had the following to say.

Nigeria-Equatorial Guinea relations from Balewa to Gowon has been one of agony, ingratitude, provocation and the wanton violation of Nigerian national and international rights and prestige... *It is necessary that*

*Nigeria should consider Equatorial Guinea as a challenge unless and only if Equatorial Guinea conducts itself peacefully and in concert with socio-economic, political, strategic and international images of the Republic of Nigeria. (Okadigbo 1976: 7, emphasis mine)*

Yet another commentator produced the following, even more feisty, comments:

If like a spoilt child, Malabo proves difficult, Nigeria should not only show its teeth but also bite Malabo hideously. That is what the US does to heady Latin American countries. Leadership is not obtained through rhetoric but through positive action. (Dureke 1988: 7)

Even labour could not be left out of the rash of calls for a Greater Nigeria. As it stressed in the aftermath of the 1976 crisis,

Having regard to the fact that Nigerian labour built up the economy of the island without any compensation to the workers, and in view of the hostility of that island to the existence of Nigerians, the NLC calls on the Federal Government to consider, as a matter of urgency, the imperative necessity to annex *that* island. (**Daily Times**, January 26<sup>th</sup> 1976, p. 1, emphasis mine)

A question ought to be posed concerning the extent to which Nigeria's administration by a succession of military rulers impacted on the language and conduct of social discourse as reflected in the media.<sup>11</sup> It is important to observe in this regard that on the two mentioned occasions when relations between the two countries were at their lowest, Nigeria was under different military regimes. In January 1976, General Murtala Muhammed was in power, whereas in 1988, when the furore over 'Oprocage',<sup>12</sup> broke out, Nigeria was under the control of General Ibrahim Babangida, yet another military ruler. Although a direct linkage is hard to make here, several studies have noted that the dominance of a democratic ethos in any particular society inevitably affects the nuances of social communication and exchange (See, for example, Yule 1985 and Ojo 1999). The social backdrop may therefore have played some role in the construction of the Nigerian media's truculent language.

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<sup>11</sup> Even more plausibly, civil society in Nigeria, of which the press remains a crucial segment, has been gradually but steadily infused with a certain authoritarian mentality. The evidence emerges in the employment of violent language and an unfortunate subscription to the principle of immediacy in recommending solutions to emerging social crises.

<sup>12</sup> The name given by the South Africans to their 'agricultural' venture in Equatorial Guinea.

## 4. CONCLUSIONS

The notion that Nigeria has been set apart by providence to lead the rest of the black race is an old one. As indicated earlier in this paper, this notion, fuelled by the nation's resource endowments and demographic majority, is widely subscribed to by a cross-section of the Nigerian political and economic elite. Given its frequency, it is hardly surprising that the media also fervently shares the same notion. Using the historically troubled canvas of Nigeria-Equatorial Guinea relations as a backdrop, we have been able to demonstrate how the (Nigerian) media plays a dual role of mirroring, and at the same time influencing, a particular reality. Thus, we have shown how, using different techniques, the media have helped in the construction of a hegemonic agenda.

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