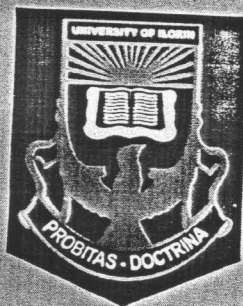


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NIGERIA'S RELATIONS WITH THE WEST: A FOCUS ON FRANCE (1960-2000)

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Introduction

The end of cold war politics blew off the ideological shield under which a good number of developing nations perched either as allies of the super-powers or as 'neutrals'. Whichever side, they attracted attention from either bloc or both as a result of containment and counter-containment strategies. With the collapse of one of the Soviet Union, this category of states (developing countries) now appears to be confronted by a political *cul-de-sac*.

It has therefore, become compelling that these states re-adjust their compass in order to sail through the apparently uncharted sea which the emerging world order portends. Consequently, attempts are being made by them to devise or revise their relationship with the 'victorious' West in order to survive in the increasingly shrinking but complex unipolar global order anchored solely on Western doctrines of democratic pluralism and economic liberalism.

Central to this survivalist strategy is a resurgence in the utility of bilateralism as a tool of foreign policy. Without prejudice to the age-old value of multilateral diplomacy which, going by the recent collapse in multilateral trade talks in Cancun (Mexico) and the virtual death of the Doha Round among others, would seem to be on the decline, bilateralism affords states the opportunity to relate with other actors on a case-by-case basis. It is within this context that we situate an examination of Nigeria-France relations.

But one may then ask, why France? France is incontrovertibly a prominent Western actor. With its membership of the powerful

Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development where collective decisions are taken on debtor nations, coupled with a strong presence in the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the European Union (EU), France maintains, a towering influence in international affairs. Above all, when combined with its membership of the G.8, NATO and a permanent seat at the Security Council of the United Nations, France's credentials as a powerful Western state are not in doubt.

Interestingly, France is one country with which Nigeria shares some vital interests. All Nigeria's neighbours are France's ex-colonies – Republics of Benin, Chad, Niger and Cameroon. Besides, over sixty percent of Nigeria's external debt is owed to the Paris club of creditors¹ and France is one of the largest investors in the Nigerian economy with interests ranging from manufacturing, construction to oil exploration. Ironically, these common interests have not prevented Nigeria-France relations from oscillating between conflict and rapprochement, a vicious cycle which has remained the hallmark of the relationship from its inception.

Evolution of Nigeria–France Relations

Generally speaking, Franco-African relations date back to the latter part of the eighteenth century. It actually began with trading in 1626 along Senegal River, then to military subjugation and ultimately, colonialism (Ede, 1986). However, because Nigeria did not come under direct French colonial rule, relations at the colonial period were minimal. And since Nigeria was yet under British colonial rule, foreign relations were monopolized by the British colonial lords. Therefore, our discussion of the development of Nigeria's relation with France will begin from 1960 when Nigeria became a sovereign entity.

The immediate post-independence phase of Nigeria-France relations was marked by conflict and hostilities. Even as independence drew nearer, signs of confrontation had already appeared on the horizon when Nigeria protested against the French Atomic tests in the Sahara. France's intransigence, and more importantly, President de Gaulle's discountenance of Nigeria's protests led to the termination of diplomatic relations in 1961 (Akinterinwa, 1990). It took a long and

complex process of negotiation involving some of Nigeria's Francophone neighbours that rely on Nigerian Ports for French imports before relations were re-established in 1965 (Akinterinwa, 1999).

But the rapprochement was to be short-lived. Nigeria-France relations relapsed back to confrontation when the Nigerian Civil War erupted. France was alleged to have given active support to the Biafran secessionists (Bach, 1986; Akinterinwa, 1999) France only came short of according official recognition to Biafra as some of her ex-colonies did². As it had been speculated in informed quarters, de Gaulle's France intent was on dismembering Nigeria either to reduce it to a less threatening size or pay her back in her own coins for the humiliation France suffered as a result of the break in diplomatic relations and Nigeria's declaration of a highly respected French diplomat, Raymond Offroy, *persona non grata* (Akinterinwa, 1999).

Soon afterwards, relations between Nigeria and France were to enter another phase of rapprochement when after the civil war, Nigeria's Head of State, Yakubu Gowon promised not to penalize French interests in Nigeria in the spirit of his post-war reconciliation policy (Nweke, 1976; Akinterinwa, 1999). This, coupled with the ascension to power in Paris of George Pompidou in 1969, prepared the ground for a relatively long era of stability in Franco-Nigerian relations.. Pompidou, unlike de Gaulle, was more concerned with aggressive expansion of French economic interest into non-Francophone spheres (Akintewinwa, 1988). Having realized the cost and ultimate futility of his predecessor's support for the secessionists, he declared that 'France's aid that would not be appreciated was no longer necessary' (Akinterinwa, 1999). It was not mere coincidence that it took only months for Biafran rebels to surrender as soon as French support ceased. It is then possible to ask whether the civil war would have lasted that long without France's support for the secessionists *ab initio*. Meanwhile, a couple of days after Biafra's unconditional surrender, Pompidou offered to assist Nigeria in its post-war re-construction programmes.

However, this newfound aura of cordial relations was indeed fragile. On the one hand, Nigeria's tortuous experience of the civil war³ years has taught her to abhor external intervention in its neighbourhood and West African sub-region. Thenceforth, a policy of

active engagement in sub-regional integration and good neighbourliness became the fulcrum of Nigeria's foreign policy. Pompidou's France, on the other hand, actively promoted the formation of a customs union among Francophone West African States (Communauté Economique d'Afrique Occidentale (CEAO)). But, Nigeria's commitment toward the realization of the ECOWAS project as a counterpoise to French intervention was to smack off another round of suspicion and hostility between the two states.

Meanwhile both states experienced regime change. While in France, Pompidou passed away and was replaced by Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, the Gowon administration in Nigeria was toppled, paving way for Generals Mohammad Murtala and Olusegun Obasanjo. The Murtala/Obasanjo regime, apparently basking in pseudo-revolutionary antics and petro-dollar windfalls of the oil boom era embarked on proactive foreign policy, especially as it concerns decolonization and afrocentricism. The core issues of attention to Nigeria-France relations of this period include: France's close collaboration with apartheid South Africa; Chadian crisis; and the anti-Nigerian posture of France in Nigeria's bid for a permanent membership of the United Nations Security Council in 1977 (Akinterinwa, 1999).

With a successfully executed transition to civil rule, the Murtala-Obasanjo regime ushered in a democratically elected government in Nigeria. A potent challenge to Nigeria-France relations under the Usman Aliyu Shagari led government was the Nigeria-Cameroon border dispute in which France openly supported Cameroon (Nweke 1990; *The Guardian* 8th Feb., 1994). Another major issue was the row over the visit of President Shagari to France in 1982 concerning diplomatic protocol. But in spite of these disagreements, the period recorded no major upset in diplomatic relations.

The Buhari-Idiagbon regime which toppled the Shagari government was seen as extremely dictatorial, especially with the enactment of draconian decrees to curtail individual liberty and freedom of press. Above all, the ill-will generated by the regime's alleged involvement in the kidnap of Umaru Dikko from Britain earned it the wrath of Western nations including France. But a palace coup soon led to yet another change of government in Nigeria and General Ibrahim Babangida assumed the reign of governance.

Basically, the policy of economic diplomacy which the Babangida administration adopted did not give room for confrontation with major Western international actors. But the sordid implementation of the adjustment programme and a general lull in economic and industrial activities unsettled the relationship (Aremu, 2003). The high point of the Mitterand/Babangida parley was the state visit to Paris of President Babangida on 26th February, 1990. However, the regime's prevarication in handling its transition to civil rule programme crested with the inglorious annulment of the June 12 presidential election widely acclaimed to have been won by Chief M.K.O. Abiola. A combination of domestic and external pressures led to Babangida's 'stepping aside' for an interim government which, as a 'child of necessity' was short-lived.

The Sanni Abacha junta which took over government in Nigeria did little to assuage the already tense feelings of the domestic and international environment. The controversial June 12 saga which the regime inherited and did nothing to redress, its own abysmal human rights record and improper handling of its transition project as evidenced in a self-succession bid (*Tazarcé*) combined to earn it ostracization by the international community in general and the European union in particular. This accounted for the low diplomatic intercourse between Nigeria and France within this period. When upon the death of the French President, Francois Mitterand, General Abacha intended sending a top-level condolence party to Paris, it was rejected by the French government (*Nigerian Tribune* 17th January, 1996).

Not too long afterwards, General Abacha died. Thus, while in France, Jacques Chirac succeeded Mitterand, General Abdulsalam Abubakar replaced Abacha in Nigeria. The period of Abdulsalam's administration was too short (only nine months) to allow for a thorough delineation of discernible trends in Franco-Nigerian relations. A major highlight of the relationship was the official visit to France of General Abubakar in 1998 as part of his globetrotting effort to rekindle international confidence in his regime's transition process that was successfully completed in 1999.

In a similar fashion, even as president-elect, Chief Olusegun Obasanjo deemed it necessary to visit Elysees Palace to solicit support for the in-coming democratic regime. As a matter of fact, France was

the first European state to be so visited by the new Nigerian President. In keeping with the traditional diplomatic principle of reciprocity, and as a mark of confidence in the new government, the French President paid an unprecedented state visit to Nigeria in July 1999, barely a couple of months after the Obasanjo administration was inaugurated. At the State Banquet organized in honour of the visiting President Jacques Chirac, President Obasanjo (1999) remarked that "This administration attaches great importance to the bilateral economic relations between Nigeria and France".

To further convince his guest, Obasanjo touched on an area of concern to an average French person:

I would like you to know that Nigeria has adopted the French language as the second official language. In not too distant future, one of my successors may be receiving one of your successors in the French language (1999).

The status of French language in Nigeria and elsewhere has always attracted attention in French/Francophone elite circles. Obasanjo further declared that Nigeria was aware of the concern of the international community for democracy in Nigeria. But he quickly noted that 'political and economic reforms programmes cannot be successfully implemented without a lasting solution to the problem of external debt'. Most importantly, the visit afforded both states the opportunity to revive existing bilateral agreements and initiated new ones (*The Guardian*, 24th. July 1999).

This high level diplomatic contact continued and culminated in a state visit to Paris of President Olusegun Obasanjo in February 2000. In a state banquet in honour of President Obasanjo hosted by President Chirac, Obasanjo again stated that:

My visit which comes barely seven months after your historic visit to Nigeria last year is a clear indication of the confidence we have in the relations between our two countries (2000).

He stressed further that:

I would like to assure you and the good people of France of our continued friendship and desire for us to be allies in global struggle for the alleviation of poverty, upliftment of humanity and the struggle to achieve global peace (2000).

The state visit provided opportunity for the Nigerian President to once again draw France's attention to the excruciating pain resulting from a huge debt burden. It is noteworthy that over sixty *per cent* of Nigeria's external debt is owed to the Paris club of creditors (CBN, 2000; Aremu, 2003). And over thirty *per cent* of the country's foreign exchange earnings is used to service debts, the origin of which is shrouded in ambiguity and controversy (Obasanjo, 1999).

Another fallout of the official visit was a meeting with the French Business community and private sector where the President urged for more investment in the Nigerian economy. At the end of the visit, Nigeria was officially admitted into the *French Priority Solidarity Zone*. This, by implication, places Nigeria at par with erstwhile French partners (ex-colonies) in Africa as it concerns Foreign Aid, investment and trade. France also declared support for Nigeria's candidature into the permanent membership of the Security Council of the United Nations.

Meanwhile, the new era of stronger politico-diplomatic and economic ties was seriously threatened with the elevation to the centre-stage of international discourse of the long-standing boundary dispute between Nigeria and Cameroon. The International Court of Justice (ICJ) ruled in favour of Cameroon as possessing legal claim to the disputed Bakassi Peninsula. However, this has not been allowed to crystallize into overt diplomatic row between Nigeria and France.

Some Factors that Shaped Nigeria-France Relations

From the foregoing, it is possible to identify some factors that have shaped the pattern and content of Nigeria-France relations.

(a) Cold War Politics

Most African states attained sovereignty at a time when the cold war between the proponents of capitalist and socialist ideologies raged. The imperative of the antagonism between the Western bloc (to which France belongs) and the Eastern bloc dictated that France built stronger ties with ex-colonies in Africa. Evidently, Africa became a veritable theatre of action because of its inviting opportunities and glaring vulnerabilities to which each of the contending blocs appealed. But having literally lost Guinea under Sekou Toure to communist appeals, France had to strengthen her grip on ex-colonies whose vast resources and awesome numerical strength in international fora cannot be discountenanced.

Ostensibly therefore, it may be understandable that there is in France, a conscious desire to build a stronger bond with the Francophone countries for fear of losing them to either their Anglophone rivals or communist adversaries. This largely explains France's interventionist posture⁴ in Francophone African affairs. On the other hand, this contrast and conflict with Nigeria's aspiration for leadership role in Africa, and the desire for 'total liberation' of the African continent from foreign domination was part of Nigeria's Afrocentric foreign policy.

(b) Traditional Anglo-French Rivalry

Historically, Britain and France consider each other as rivals and atimes, as adversaries. At about 17th century, France and Britain engaged in wars over territorial possessions in America and India (Jarolimek, et al, 1985). France was defeated and had to let go off its colonies in mainland North America. New France (now called Canada) fell to England. France also lost all its overseas territories in India to England. *Entente cordiale* of 1904 smoothed the rough edges in Anglo-French confrontations.

Nevertheless, the same circumstance of history had brought France and Britain together to combat German aggression in World Wars I and II. But the age long suspicion and intermittent bellicosity reminiscent of the Anglo-French rivalry hovers around Nigeria-France relations. Because Nigeria was a British colony, France often viewed Nigeria as harbouring, on behalf of Britain, a veiled Anglophone

agenda in post-colonial Africa and that her threateningly large size, vast resources as well as a desire for a leadership role in Africa are but a design to 'anglicize' the former French colonies (Akinterinwa, 1999). This feeling of suspicion and distrust has been the basis for France's sponsoring of parallel organizations within regional or sub-regional groupings. Such rival organizations (e.g. CEAO), as seen by France was not only necessary for stronger France-Francophone ties, but most importantly, as a counterpoise to any expansionist agenda of non-French forces which, to France, Nigeria represents.

(c) Leadership Styles

Decision-making theorists would have exaggerated somehow, when they contended that, it is leaders that ultimately determine the behaviour of states. Nevertheless, it remains incontrovertible that leaders choose among policy alternatives, determine the course of action and commit state resources and apparati in pursuit of those ends (White, 1978). Hermann et al, argue that under a personalized strong executive – type leadership, where a single leader decides the main outlines of policy, the structural constraints are limited (1987). The erstwhile French President, Charles de Gaulle could be said to have fitted this category of leadership.

There is, therefore, a sense in the argument that Nigeria-France relations in the formative years were influenced greatly by de Gaulle's implosive character. As a French nationalist, de Gaulle's life was dominated by a passion to restore and retain the grandeur of the 'Great French Empire' (Olabode, 2000; Bach, 1986). On the contrary, Nigeria's decision makers in the immediate post-independence era, civilian or military, were more dependent on falangist authority erected on frail and infantile bureaucracy (Nweke, 1983; Adeniran, 1983).

To clearly illustrate the impact of leadership on Nigeria-France relations, one may draw instances from the sudden change from confrontation to cooperation immediately Pompidou replaced de Gaulle in Elysees Palace. As noted earlier, Pompidou ceased support for the secessionists and ushered in an era of rapprochement. Hence, the early confrontation that was to set the tone for subsequent patterns of Nigeria-France relations could be explained as having its roots in

leadership idiosyncratic inclination. With a little prudence on both sides, the entire history would probably have been different.

Concluding Comments

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the transformation of global politics into unipolarity in which Western actors dominates, developing states have been re-defining their foreign policy to take account of the new challenge. Hence, the paper looked at Nigeria's relation with a key western state – France. The paper notes that although Nigeria and France ought to enjoy closer relationship owing to an array of common issues of concern to both states, it remains a paradox that they have been locked in a whirlpool of diplomatic conflicts from suspension of diplomatic relations in 1961 to France's support for Biafran secessionists. An attempt was made to identify some of the factors that seemed to have shaped Franco – Nigerian relations over time. It suggests that policy makers on both sides would need to harness, to the fullest, the potential benefits of the relationship between both states. This could only be made possible with greater and more intense communication through, for instance, a periodic Franco – Nigerian Summit to be held on a rotational basis between Paris and Abuja. Such preventive diplomacy will highlight topical issues of bilateral concerns, forge greater unity between Nigeria and France, and douse any suspicion that might be held in Francophone circles. Such preemptive enterprise is likely to be less expensive than the usual remedial and reactionary policies that had characterized Nigeria's relations with France. Now that the cold war is over, it is only hoped that a stronger and more mutually rewarding relationship would be forged between Nigeria and France.

Notes

1. These figures are derived from the CBN End of Year Report and Statement of Account for Year 2000.

2. Cote d'Ivoire, Gabon, Zaire and Tanzania officially recognized the Republic of Biafra.
3. Republic of Benin was used to channel arms, ammunition and logistics to the Ojukwu – led Secessionists under the guise of humanitarian 'relief' assistance. See Ede O.O.B (1986) Nigeria and Francophone Africa in Olusanya G.O. and Akindele R.A. (Eds.) *Nigeria's External Relations: The First Twenty – Five Years*, Ibadan.
4. Such Interventionist Strategies led to the removal from office of anti-France Leaders like Modibbo Keita of Mali and Sekou Toure of Guinea. It also took the form of destabilization of anti-France regimes such as Mathew Kerekou's Government in Benin and Leon Mba's Administration in Gabon. For further discussion of this subject, see Jibril, L. (1993) 'Towards a Nigerian Perspective on the French Problematic in Africa' in Haruna J. and Massoud, O. (Eds.) *France and Nigeria: Issues in Comparative Studies*, Ibadan, CREDU.

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