

**NIGERIA AND EQUATORIAL GUINEA, A NEAR BUT FAR NEIGHBOURS: ANALYZING  
RELATIONS BETWEEN TWO CONTIGUOUS NATIONS**

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**ABSTRACT**

*Nigeria and Equatorial Guinea are two contiguous neighbours in the Guly of Guinea. Separated without land borders, by about 150 kilometres of Atlantic ocean, both countries share common maritime boundary and linked by close exclusive economic zones. Unfortunately, these two close neighbours which should serve as examples of robust relationship have been characterized by not too vibrant and often frosty and dormant relations. This study examines the relationship between these two neighbours with limited cooperation and unexplored opportunities. The study is guided by the theory of propinquity as a tool of analysis and adopted the qualitative method of data collection with the application of content analysis in the presentation of data. The study argues that although, both countries have improved their relations in recent years with reduced mutual suspicion and relaxation of tension, however, much needs to be done in accelerating and re-energizing Nigeria and Equatorial Guinea relations.*

**KeyWords:** *Propinquity, Maritime Boundary; Gulf of Guinea, Bight of Biafra, Exclusive Economic Zone.*

**Introduction**

From Independence in 1960, Nigeria has been trying to forge relations with other states in the world both far and contiguous. However, the country's relations with her immediate neighbours have not been too robust. According to Ate and Akinterinwa (1992), such relationship has been marked by mutual suspicion, distrust and outright alienation. Unfortunately, this not too vibrant relationship has been worst with her island neighbour, Equatorial Guinea, who shares maritime boundary with Nigeria in the Gulf of Guinea. Considering the close proximity of the two neighbours and the enormous endowments of the two nations in hydro-carbon and marine resources, both of them should have enjoyed the benefits of shared prosperity and reciprocal relations for mutual development.

In the area of trade and investment, Nigeria ought to have been Equatorial Guinea's major trading partner, while Equatorial Guinea ought to be Nigeria's leading investment outpost, considering Nigeria's size, population, economic development, diplomatic and strategic potentials vis-à-vis Equatorial Guinea. This has never been so as Equatorial Guinea sometimes has posed serious threat to Nigeria's national security and interests by either ill-treatment of Nigerian nationals living in the country or through obnoxious alliance with Nigeria's enemies in

the past, although the story has started to change gradually in the recent decades. According to Aluko (1981) cited in Mbachu (2000:93).

Prior to Nigeria's Independence, the association of Nigeria and Equatorial Guinea had almost been cat and dog relationship. There were illegal movement of persons and goods from Nigeria to this Atlantic island. There were series of agreements between the government of Lagos and Sancta Isabel on co-existence and equitable economic relationship, but, these agreements did not remove the suspicion between them. The government in Nigeria always had the feeling that Equatorial Guinea could be used as a launching ground to attack her by any

enemy nation, while the government of Equatorial Guinea had the fear that Nigeria would annex the island.

Also, before and after Nigeria's independence, the cocoa plantations in Equatorial Guinea was the major attraction of Nigerian workers who were engaged in the country's plantations. Unfortunately, these labourers or workers were given inhuman treatment by Equatorial Guinea authorities. The outcry which the slave labour attracted caused the Nigeria governments to send several high powered delegations to the country so as to ameliorate the situation and relay the concern of Nigerian authorities to the government of Equatorial Guinea. These delegations were variously led by the likes of Chief Samuel Akintola in 1953, Chief Festus Okotie – in 1954; Chief J.M. Johnson in 1957; and Mallam Aminu Kano in 1969 who went as a special envoy of Nigeria to protest the killing of four Nigerians in Ruo Muni, Equatorial Guinea by some local militia in the country (see Aluko, 1981).

Relations between Nigeria and Equatorial Guinea ought to have blossomed than some other nations, considering the presence of the Igbos as the third largest ethnic group in the country (<https://www.igbodefender.com> 2019), with a population of more than 33,500 in 2015, found mainly in Bioko region of Equatorial Guinea. The Igbo nation is one of the largest ethnic groups in Nigeria, hence, such consanguinal relationship should be a veritable asset for greater enhancement of relations between the two countries like Nigeria – Niger Republic, Nigeria – Benin, and Nigeria – Togo where the Hausa and Yoruba ethnic groups are found as the Igbos in Equatorial Guinea

The point being x-rayed here is that with the neighbourhood propinquity of both countries, ethnic link and joint economic resources and development zones between Nigeria and Equatorial Guinea, relations between the two countries should have been greater than what it is presently.

This study therefore sets out to examine the Nigeria/Equatorial Guinea relations which can rightly or more appropriately be described as often hot, cold and relatively cordial with abounding unexplored opportunities.

### **THEORETICAL GUIDE**

Analysis of the relations between two continuous nations like Nigeria and Equatorial Guinea cannot be successful without the application of an appropriate theoretical framework to provide balance to the study. It is on this note that the choice of the theory of propinquity is found suitable for the understanding of both nation's relations. The theory of propinquity was first proposed or espoused by Theodore Newcoms. According to him, persons are attracted to one another on the basis of similar attitudes towards commonly relevant objects and goals. Once a relationship is formed, it strives to maintain a symmetrical balance between attraction and the common attitudes. The term propinquity means nearness. Propinquity is derived from Latin word, propinquitas which means nearness. In social psychology, propinquity is one of the main factors leading to interpersonal attraction. It can mean physical proximity, a kinship between people or a solidarity in nature between things.

Thus, the theory of propinquity states that individuals or groups affiliate with one another because of special or geographical proximity. The theory appears to explain the group formation process based on nearness. In an organization, employees who work in the same area of the plant or office or managers would more probably form into groups than would those who are not physically located together. The law of propinquity effect is the tendency for people to form friendships or romantic relationships with those whom they encounter often, forming a bond between subject and friend (Wikipedia).

Thus, the propinquity theory when applied to states relations is very appropriate in the analysis of the relationship between Nigeria and Equatorial Guinea who share special and geographical proximity, historical socio-economic and cultural link and inter-ethnic structural and demographic configuration. As is often said that one's neighbour is his most reliable ally, Nigeria and Equatorial Guinea ought to forge very close ties between them.

Both countries share certain things in common, such as contiguous maritime boundary, close exclusive economic zones; Atlantic Coast of about 150 kilometres distance and the presence of Igbo ethnic group in both countries indigenous populations; as well as historical links. The above common variables serve as bonds that necessitate the need for closer and more robust ties between both Gulf of Guinea nations.

### **NIGERIA AND EQUATORIAL GUINEA EXPERIENCES**

As stated earlier, Nigeria and Equatorial Guinea share sea border in the Gulf of Guinea. Both nations were colonized by different European countries namely, Britain and Spain. Nigeria's relations with Equatorial Guinea has neither been too robust nor continuously frosty.

Nigeria's early negative experience with Equatorial Guinea was in 1975 when the Youth Brigade of Equatorial Guinea beat up the wife of the third secretary and her Nigerian housemaid. The maid was held for many days after the incident. Worse still, the maid was not only denied food but was reported to have been subjected to repeated beating and assault in the detention cell. In addition, the Youth Brigade went ahead to the market and attacked other unsuspecting Nigerians and looted their goods extensively.

Prior to this development, the Nigerian nationals in Equatorial Guinea were subjected to many forms of illtreatments and human rights abuses, hence, this prompted late General Murtala Mohammed as the then Nigerian head of State to send Nigeria airplanes with soldiers to Equatorial Guinea for forceful evacuation of thousands of Nigerians in that country whose conditions approximated that of slavery and savagery.

However, this incident did not lead to adverse diplomatic face-off between the two nations. For some time in the 1970s and 1980s, apartheid South Africa made efforts to establish very close ties with Equatorial Guinea, and Pretoria regime recorded a measure of success. This development became source of irritation to Nigeria and this negatively affected relations between the two nations. In 1988, the Nigerian government was jolted when it discovered that apartheid South African government had stationed her troops in Equatorial Guinea for the purpose of using the country as an observation post to undermine Nigerian security. The apartheid regime had for many years sought for ways of dealing with Nigeria for her anti-apartheid posture and supports, but without success probably because of the distance between Nigeria and South Africa, but now found Equatorial Guinea as a willing tool and base to launch her long term aspiration to undermine, destabilize or punish Nigeria.

Before trying to extend her destabilization effort to Nigeria through Equatorial Guinea, South Africa had dealt with some of her close neighbours who were involved in the struggle for the eradication of apartheid. Consequent upon this development, Nigeria had to put diplomatic pressure on Equatorial Guinea and threatened her with unpleasant consequences if the country did not expel South Africa from her territory, since South African military presence was a serious threat to Nigeria's national security and an act of aggression by both Equatorial Guinea and South Africa on Nigeria.

Apart from the above, Nigeria and Equatorial Guinea share common maritime boundary in the Atlantic coast of the Gulf of Guinea which is one of the world's richest reservoir of oil and natural gas. Both nations have present and future joint development zones, with Nigeria's size, might, resources and expertise in oil exploration and development ahead of Equatorial Guinea. Therefore, a hostile relationship such as the one posed by South African threat was going to definitely do more harm to Equatorial Guinea than Nigeria. Nigeria possessed the capability to punish Equatorial Guinea or possibly invade the country of which its South African rapprochement would not help her, considering the proximity between the two nations.

Equatorial Guinea was made to understand that South Africa which is located more than five thousand kilometers away from Nigeria and with the number of African nations with intervening territories who were opposed to South Africa's apartheid policy such as Namibia, Angola, Congo DRC (Zaire), Congo

Brazzaville, Gabon Cameroon etc, a conflict between Nigeria and Equatorial Guinea arising from the issue was going to spell doom for Equatorial Guinea.

Nigeria was also able to win the diplomatic support and solidarity of many African countries who condemned and reprimanded Equatorial Guinea and threatened to support Nigeria’s effort to deal with the matters with adverse consequences on Equatorial Guinea. At the end of serious diplomatic pressures and with the threat by Nigeria to Equatorial Guinea of unimaginable consequences for its security threat to the country in collaboration with South Africa, Equatorial Guinea later forced South Africa out of its territory thereby dousing the tension arising from the unfortunate development. However, since the dismantling of apartheid regime and the emergence of multi-racial government in South Africa in 1994, new conditions for the improvement of relations between Nigeria and Equatorial Guinea have emerged while this major source of dispute was eradicated.

### **TRADE RELATIONS BETWEEN NIGERIA AND EQUATORIAL GUINEA**

According to the United Nations COMTRADE data base on international trade, Nigeria exported to Equatorial Guinea goods worth \$99.49 thousand United States dollars in 1918 (updated in 2020). Also in the same year, Nigeria imported goods valued at \$30.62 million dollars from Equatorial Guinea. The tables below show Nigeria’s export and import to and from Equatorial Guinea from 2013 to 2018.

#### **A**

<b>NIGERIA’S EXPORTS TO EQUATORIAL GUINEA FROM 2013 – 2018</b>	<b>VALUE</b>	<b>DATE</b>
Electrical/Electronic Equipment	\$349 K	2013
Soaps, lubricants, waxes, candles, modeling pastes	\$5.94 K	2013
Salt, sulphur, earth, stone, plaster, lime, cement	\$43.64 K	2013
Articles of Iron and Steel	\$1.6 K	2014
Tools, implements, cutlery of base metal	\$5.37 K	2014
Ships, Boats and other floating structures	\$77.60 M	2014
Machinery, Nuclear reactors, Boilers	\$1.86 K	2016
Diary products, Eggs, Honey, Edible products	\$11.58 K	2016
Tobacco and manufacturers, Tobacco substitutes	\$99.49 K	2018

**Source:** <https://tradingeconomics.com.equa> 10/10/20

#### **B**

<b>NIGERIA’S IMPORTS FROM EQUATORIAL GUINEA FROM 2013 – 2018</b>	<b>VALUE</b>	<b>DATE</b>
Mineral fuels, oil, Distillation products	\$24.52 M	2018
Organic Chemicals	\$5.99 M	2018
Ships, Boats and other floating structures	\$71.75 K	2018
Machinery, Nuclear reactors, Boilers	\$21.40 K	2018
Optical, Photo, Technical, medical apparatus	\$13.39 K	2018
Pharmaceutical products	\$524 K	2018
Beverages, spirits and vinegar	\$334 K	2018
Vehicles other than railway, train way	\$58.88 K	2017
Electrical, Electronic equipment	\$20.60 K	2017
Paper and paperboard, Articles of pulp, paper and Board	\$17.12 k	2017

**Source:** <https://tradingeconomics.com>nigeria>e-20/11/20>

The trade statistics tabulated above shows that the value both export and import trades between Nigeria and Equatorial Guinea within the period 2013 to 2018-2019 did not exceed \$140.0 million. This is grossly inadequate. What this means is that both countries are not making use of the geo-strategic and economic

potentials available in them but rather prefers distant relations instead of exploring the opportunities which close proximity presents. This re-enforces the belief that both Nigeria and Equatorial Guinea are near but far neighbours in trade and reciprocal relationship.

### **WHAT IS TO BE DONE?**

As the economic and geo-strategic relationships are still not exciting, the question that arises is what are to be done to improve relations between the two neighbours and make it more robust and result oriented. Both countries can tap from the opportunities which globalization and the recently adopted Africa Free Trade area agreement provides to enhance trade and other relations.

In the past, effort had been made by the two nations ameliorate potential areas of friction, of great importance is the maturity exhibited by both Nigeria and Equatorial Guinea in handling their maritime boundary delimitation. This commendable diplomatic approach has indeed helped to reassure Equatorial Guinea which hitherto expressed fear of domination by her bigger neighbour Nigeria that such was based on misperception (See Nation Boundary Commission, 1997:11). This agreement has enabled Equatorial Guinea to carry out petroleum exploitation in the Bight of Biafra in a peaceful atmosphere. It was the aftermath of this agreement/delimitation that divided the Zafiro Oil Well on the ratio of sixty percent to forty percent between Equatorial Guinea and Nigeria (see National Boundary Commission, 1997:111). However, further investments are needed in oil exploration and exploitation between the two countries. Nigerian business men who have expertise and investments in oil industry should be encouraged to engage in joint venture investments in the oil sector since Nigeria seem to have pedigree and comparative advantage over Equatorial Guinea in the industry. Nigerian business men have not utilized investment opportunities available in Equatorial Guinea not only in the oil and gas sectors but also in areas of trade and commerce including fishing. This will enhance controlled movement of nationals of both countries who will further boost investment opportunities. Nigeria already has advantage considering the fact that the Igbo nation constitute the third largest group in Equatorial Guinea just as it is one of the major groups in Nigeria.

The Gulf of Guinea where both countries are located is one of the hot beds of piracy in the world. There is also the problem of insurgency/militancy. The security of this region is very important to the growth of maritime life of the region as well as the ocean going vessels in the world. The security and improvement of water ways and sea routes of both countries in the Gulf of Guinea will be of great benefit to the countries and the rest of the world.

Up till now, direct flights between Nigeria and Equatorial Guinea is very low. This situation gives credence to the fact that transportation and economic cooperation between the two countries is still very low. This is a proof of limited socio-economic relations between the two nations.

There is need for the re-vitalization and re-suscilation of the Nigeria - Equatorial Guinea bi-national or joint commission which has been in a state of coma or dormant for the promotion of economic growth, trade and development for both countries. Above all, both Nigeria and Equatorial Guinea should show commitment to the promotion and growth of democracy and good governance in their countries which are necessary pre-requisites for any meaningful socio-political and economic relations in the new world order. The abuse of foreign nationals particularly Nigerians as witnessed in the past by Equatorial Guinea must not be allowed to repeat as well as the murder of nationals under Macias Nguema before he was overthrown and killed in 1979.

Macias Nguema masterminded one of the worst brutal and repressive regimes in Africa between 1960s and 1970s. During this period, citizens of Equatorial Guinea were died in political violence that erupted in the country. Many immigrant labourers or workers, mainly Nigerians suffered similar fate as the killings and repression resulted in diplomatic face-off between the two neighbouring nations.

### **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

There is no doubt that there have been improved relations between Nigeria and Equatorial Guinea since the 1990s. Three factors were responsible for this positive development. They include: the emergence of oil economy that replaced cocoa economy which was responsible for the use of forced labour in plantations in Equatorial Guinea, the end of cold war in the 1990s and the eradication of apartheid and white minority regime in South Africa also in the 1990s. These events led to the relaxation of sources of conflict and disagreements. As Osuntokun (1992) observed, “the emergence of multi-racial government in South Africa in 1994 created new conditions for the development of cordial relations between Equatorial Guinea and Nigeria. The end of apartheid regime in South Africa which hitherto attempted to undermine Nigeria’s national security with the cooperation of Equatorial Guinea also resulted in new improved relations as the two countries abandoned their previous cat and mouse relations and embraced diplomatic approach in handling diplomatic issues.

From the trade statistics earlier highlighted in this study, there is evidence of growing economic relations between Nigeria and Equatorial Guinea but this relations especially in the area of trade is grossly inadequate and below expectations. Even in the oil sector where the two nations are well endowed, there is little or no evidence of the participation of the nationals of both nations in joint development and investments. For instance, since Nigeria has more expertise in the oil industry, Equatorial Guinea ought to tap from the abundant human and technical resources available in the country to grow and develop her own oil industry. Many indigenous players in Nigeria’s oil sector can be of great benefit to Equatorial Guinea, which may lead to faster transfer of technology and development of local content in Equatorial Guinea.

Other areas which both nations should have extended and improved relations include, education, health, transportation (maritime and air), agriculture (marine resources) and security etc. For instance, it is easier to travel to United Kingdom and South Africa from Nigeria which are above 5000 kilometres away than Equatorial Guinea just about 150 kilometres from Port Harcourt, Nigeria. Even communication between Nigeria and Equatorial Guinea is not as communication between Nigeria and United States of America or United Kingdom. Improved communication between Nigeria and Equatorial Guinea can trigger and accelerate other areas of cooperation and relations.

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