

**BILATERAL RELATIONS BETWEEN NIGERIA AND
UNITED STATES OF AMERICA, 1975-1979**

BY

**OMOTERE TOPE
N.C.E., B.Ed**

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Omotere Tope attended Adeniran Ogunsanya College of Education, Otto-Ijanikin, Lagos from 2002 to 2006 (N.C.E. in Christian Religious Studies/ History) and holds a B.A. (Ed) in History and Diplomatic Studies from Tai Solarin University of Education, Ijagun, Ijebu-Ode, Ogun State. He has undergone training at the United States Institute of Peace (Online Training Program) with a certificate of course completion in *Conflict Analysis*.

He conducts researches (both online and offline) to produce academic works that students can use for their long essays, theses and dissertations. With access to his online project database www.omotere.tk, students in Colleges of Education, Polytechnics and Universities can download full texts of related works prepared by him and other researchers. This will enable them to read literature reviews, check for empirical evidences from data analysis and understand the methodology used.

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ABSTRACT

This study focused on the bilateral relationship between Nigeria and the United States of America from 1975 to 1979. The study traced the historical development of Nigeria-US relations with emphasis on Mohammed/Obasanjo foreign policy posture towards the US Government. It also examines the impact of Mohammed's policy of confrontation and its far reaching effects on Nigeria-US relations. Moreso, the study analyses Obasanjo's policy of partnership especially with the Carter administration and the implication of this partnership on Nigeria-US relations. Furthermore, the study discussed the relationship between Nigeria and US in key areas such as bilateral trade, oil and gas, power generation, rail transport system, road construction, communication, manufacturing and retail loan finance and general free trade zone. It also examined include politics, military and cultural bilateral relations between the two countries. Attention was also given to the domestic factors that shaped US relations with Nigeria and how Nigeria views the changing role of US government on the African continent. Historical method or approach was employed in this study. Both Primary and Secondary sources were used by the researcher. The study established that Nigeria's external relation with US has been beneficial to the two countries. Again, it established that the relationship between Nigeria and US is a win-win strategy but this is yet to be thoroughly maximized by the Nigerian government given the political, military, technological and economic base of US as the world Superpower in international politics.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Background to the study

Independent countries across the globe do interact for one reason or another; the independent nature of these political actors in the international arena compels them to enter into relationship with one another. Economic, socio-cultural, political and military cum peace and security in operatives make it mandatory for nation states to come together and conduct diplomatic business between and among themselves. Thus, bilateral and multi-lateral treaties are signed by the concerned state to seal their agreement.

At independence, Nigeria as a sovereign began to conduct her foreign relations under the political and governmental leadership of its Prime Minister, the late Alhaji (Sir) Abubakar Tafawa Balewa. His administration emphasized Africa to be centre-piece of Nigeria's

foreign policy. His own foreign relations business was pro-West particular with Britain, Nigeria's erstwhile colonial master. With the bloody military coup of January, 15, 1966, the late Major-General J.T. Aguisi Ironsi came to power only to be killed in a counter coup staged six months later. This development brought the retired General Yakubu Gowon to power.

Gowon borrowed a leaf from Balewa by being pro-West in his foreign affairs. He entered into agreement with Britain, the United States and other European countries. However, his administration reluctantly allowed the Soviet Union to open its embassy in Lagos.

The Gowon-led Federal Military Government was sacked in a bloodless coup which led to the assumption of power by the late General Murtala Ramat Mohammed and the retired General (now Chief) Olusegun Obasanjo who was his second in command and Chief of Staff Supreme Headquarters.

The assumption of power by these two strongmen served as a catalyst in the history of international relations as far as Nigeria was concerned. Their government injected new innovations and dynamism into the nation's foreign affairs. Mohammed was prepared to counter the imperial moves of the Western Powers especially the United States who had emerged as a major power broker in Africa particularly in Angola. Britain and Portugal also became targets of the new military administration while not leaving Cuba, a surrogate of the Soviet Union both of whom were present in Angola, challenging the United States' (US) presence there. These Western Powers, Cuba as well as South Africa became the targets of the Mohammed/Obasanjo military regime in Africa. One basic truth that must be stressed is the fact that this was the age of the Cold War during which the US and the Soviet Union were competing for military supremacy and searching for satellite countries who would support them in their bid to permanently polarize the world into

Capitalist and Communist Blocs under the US and Soviet Union respectively.

Given the above situation the Muhammed Obasanjo regime arose as a diplomatic gadfly ready to sting these powers in its resolve to emancipate African countries that were still under the tyranny of colonial masters; eradicate neo-colonialism, racism and apartheid on the African continent particularly in Portuguese colonies in Africa and racism/apartheid in Southern Africa.

Therefore, the focus of this present study is to examine the role played by Nigeria, first under the late General Mohammed who was slain in a putsch in February 1976, and later under General Obasanjo who voluntarily retired and returned the military to the barracks in October, 1979 after handing over to a civilian government headed by the President Alhaji Usman Shahu Shagari.

The Mohammed/Obasanjo regime was undoubtedly assertive and caused Nigeria to be looked upon as a regional power in Africa by her sister-African states. The study covers the period 1975 to 1979.

Objectives of the Study

This study seeks to achieve the following objectives:

- (i) Provide a detailed background to Nigeria-US relations between 1975 and 1979 with emphasis on Mohammed /Obasanjo foreign policies.
- (ii) Review Nigeria's stand on Africa as the centre-piece of her foreign policy.
- (iii) Examine the impact of Mohammed's policy of confrontation and its far reaching effects it had in building Nigeria as a regional power in Africa; and

- (iv) Analyse Obasanjo's policy of partnership especially with the Carter administration and the implication of this partnership on Nigeria-US relations.

Statement of the problem

Bilateral relations between Nigeria and the US from 1975 to 1979 had a dual character: acrimony and friendship. Between 1975 and 1976, it degenerated into a full scale diplomatic tussle where Nigeria regarded the action of the US government as insulting on the "black man". The US did not want to recognize Nigeria as a rising power in the African region. Thus, within a period of one year divided the two countries. However, beginning from early 1977, the tone of conflict was once again treated and the two countries began their friendly relations. The steps taken by these two countries to settle their conflicts call for careful study.

Literature Review

A review of literature in historical research is a key factor in determining the nature of the research topic: it provides the basis for the understanding of what other have said or written about the subject matter. It therefore becomes imperative to review what other scholars have written about Nigeria-US relations between 1975 and 1979.

The period 1975-1979 laid the foundation for an active Nigeria-US relation. During this period there were more publications on Nigeria-US relations than the previous year. According to Robert (1991) *Nigeria, Africa and the United States: from Kennedy to Reagon, prior to 1995:*

Nigeria has never exercised any significant degree of control over its neighbours; it has never played a decisive role in the affairs of any other state; it has never played a dominant role in any international issue area; and, with the exception of a few extremely minor skirmishes on its borders, it has never used military force against another state... Nigeria did play an

important role in mobilizing support for popular movement for the liberation of Angola in 1975.¹

Robert presents a true picture of Nigeria's presence in the international community prior to the period of our study. It means therefore that apart from the Nigerian Civil War which generated hot debate from around the world, no other period prior to 1975 received more attention in Nigeria-US relations than from 1975 to 1979. Robert's work makes a good introduction to Nigeria-US relations and will be useful to this study in the area of Nigeria's policy towards the United States between 1975 and 1979.

Another important work is Nathaniel Davies (1978) *The Angolan Decision of 1975: A personal Memoir.*² This work provides a detailed information on Nigeria-US perception of the Angolan crisis. To him, the Angolan crisis laid the foundation for the policy of confrontation which Nigeria adopted towards the United States from 1975 to 1979.

In essence, the memoir helped in shedding more light on the Angola crisis and its impact on Nigeria-US relations.

Bassey Ate (1987) *Decolonization and Dependence: The Development of Nigeria-US Relations, 1960-1984*³ is a good contribution to the study. The work systematically analyses the development of the relationship between Nigeria and the US during the dynamic era of decolonization. This study serves as a basis for analyzing Nigeria's stand on some key issues with the United States within the period of our study. Although, Bassey attempted to present a decolonizing history of Nigeria's foreign policy, his work paid little attention to Nigeria-US relations between 1975 and 1979 on the country's power status in Africa. Nevertheless, Bassey succeeded in linking strong economic bilateral relations between Nigeria and the US despite their disagreement on regional issue in Africa in 1975.

Alaba Ogunsanwo's (1980) "*Nigerian military and foreign policy 1975-1979*"⁴ focused on Nigerian military leaders: The Mohammed/

Obasanjo regime and discussed the foreign policies pursued during 1975-1979 military government. This work will be useful to this present study because the personality of the people involved in foreign policy formulation were analysed by the scholar. Although, Ogunsanwo did not compare the best policies pursued by Mohammed and Obasanjo towards the US government, he however, made a concrete analysis of the policies sought after by the heads of states of these two countries.

Ray Ofoegbu's (1979) *Foreign Policy and Military Rule*⁵ x-rayed three military governments in Nigeria and played much emphasis on the third Military Government (1975-1979). To Ofoegbu, it was the third Military Government first led by General Murtala Mohammed that brought radicalism into Nigeria's foreign policy. The radicalism which was introduced into Nigeria's foreign policy led to confrontation with major powers which invariably caused diplomatic conflict especially with the United States in 1975. From 1977, the

relationship began to normalize. Lieutenant General Olusegun Obasanjo, being the new leader of Nigeria, renewed Nigeria's radical foreign policy and once again, began to make close ties with President Jimmy Carter of the United States. Ofoegbu's work will be of immense value to this study. Although, it did not give a comprehensive review of Nigeria-US relations, it however laid much emphasis on the domestic policies under the Mohammed-Obasanjo military government that affected Nigeria's relation with the United States.

Scope of the Study

This study covers Nigeria's relation with the United States of America in the period between 1975 and 1979. The study examines the bilateral political relations between the two countries as well as the economic, cultural and military relations from 1975-1979. Other areas which this study covers include the domestic factors that

influenced the foreign policy of Nigeria and the US government between 1975 and 1979. Moreover, the instruments employed by Nigeria and US between 1975 and 1979 were also examined and analysed in order to give us a logical picture of what transpired between the two countries in the period of our study.

Significance of the Study

This study is very important for certain reasons.

First, it historicizes the Nigeria-US relationship between 1975 and 1979 thereby shedding more light on the dynamics that characterised the relations.

Second, it helps to re-affirm the bold attempt made by the military government under the leadership of the late General Murtala Ramat Mohammed and later the retired General (now Chief) Olusegun Obasanjo, who challenged the Western Powers who were present in Africa to direct the continent's affairs.

Third, it is useful to scholars especially diplomatic historians, political scientists, economists and international relations experts in their research. Diplomats like ambassadors, high commissioners and staffers of foreign ministries will benefit from the work.

Finally, the political and military class will learn, through this study, the need for them to be patriotic like the two former heads of state who acted as Nigeria's arrowhead in the international arena.

Research Methodology

Historical research method is used in carrying out this study. However, a critical examination of the dramatic relations between Nigeria and United states from 1975-1979 will be analysed using primary source such as, government publication and newspapers. Added to these are letters, memoirs, and documentaries.

Furthermore, this research work will make use of secondary sources of major bilateral relations between Nigeria and United

States. Books, journals, conference proceedings and internet sources will be explored to enrich this work.

End Notes

1. B., Roberts *Nigeria, Africa and the United States: from Kennedy to Reagan*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University press, 1991, p. 57
2. N., Davies, *The Angolan Decision of 1975: A personal memoir*” *Foreign Affairs* 1978, Fall 1975, p. 13
3. A., Basse, *Decolonization and Independence: The Development of Nigerian-US Relations, 1960-1984*, Colorado: West View Press Inc., 1987, p. 193.
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5. R. Ofoegbu, “Foreign Policy and Military Rule” in O. Oyediran (ed) *Nigerian Government and Politics under military Rule*. London and Basingstoke: The Macmillian Press, 1979, p. 135

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