

INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE

Between Three Continents: Rethinking Equatorial Guinea on the Fortieth Anniversary of Its Independence from Spain

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Equatorial Guinea's External Relations: São Tomé e Príncipe and the CPLP

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Introduction

From around 1471 to 1778 present day Equatorial Guinea, together with the neighbouring islands of São Tomé and Príncipe, formerly belonged to the Portuguese colonial empire. However, during this period only the latter were effectively colonized by Portugal. The small island of Annobón was settled with African slaves from São Tomé, but only as a source of employment in the local economy. Before Equatorial Guinea's independence in 1968 Santomeans constituted a considerable community in Fernando Pó and there were regular sea and air links between the four islands. It was not by coincidence that in 1972 the Liberation Movement of São Tomé and Príncipe (MLSTP) was founded in Santa Isabel (Malabo). However, due to the increasing violence by the regime of Macías Nguema (1968-1979), most Santomeans returned home. Regular sea and air links between the two neighbouring countries ceased to exist. Bilateral relations between Malabo and São Tomé were only resumed a few years ago. In 2004 President Teodoro Obiang was invited by President Fradique de Menezes as special guest to the biannual summit of the heads of state and government of the member of the CPLP. This request

but the CPLP changed its statutes to create the category of
ver. At the CPLP summit in Bissau in 2006 Equatorial Guinea formally
unity as observer state. During a visit of the CPLP's executive
abo in 2007 Obiang declared his regime's intention to introduce
third official language to become a full member of the CPLP. This paper
relations between the Gulf of Guinea islands since the 16

th century and
examines the motives behind the recent mutual approachment between Malabo and
São Tomé and the CPLP respectively.

The early Portuguese (1471-1778) and subsequent Spanish colonial period (1778-1968)

During the formal Portuguese domination of all four Gulf of Guinea islands, from around 1471 to 1778, only the islands of São Tomé and Príncipe were effectively colonized by the Portuguese. In the beginning of the 16th century the small island of Annobón (17 km²) was settled with African slaves from São Tomé, but the Portuguese presence always remained reduced to rarely more than two persons and contacts with this island were very irregular. Fernando Pó (Bioko), the only of the four Gulf of Guinea islands populated when the first Portuguese arrived, was not colonized by Portugal at all. However, at the end of the 15th century and in the early 16th century the Portuguese in São Tomé acquired slaves in Fernando Pó.¹

In later centuries, runaway slaves from São Tomé or from Príncipe, carried in their canoes by the sea currents and sometimes reached the island of Fernando Pó. In 1778, the year of the transition from the Portuguese domination to that of Spain, a group of former slaves from São Tomé and Príncipe lived in the south of Fernando Pó.² The presence of these maroons and their descendants in Ureka, in the south of the island, was also reported in 1827 when the British founded Port Clarence (Malabo). At the time, the native Bubis referred to them as 'angolanos'. The Portuguese based creole language of this maroon community in Fernando Pó exercised some influence on the emerging Equatorial Guinean Spanish.³

Cocoa was introduced in Fernando Pó in 1836 or 1854 from São Tomé and Príncipe.⁴ In the Portuguese islands the new cash crop had been introduced from Brazil around 1820. After the mid 19th century, when Spain was in effective control of the island, the runaway slaves from São Tomé and Príncipe, and, after the abolition of slavery in 1875, escaped African contract workers respectively, were frequently returned by the local Spanish authorities to their masters in São Tomé and Príncipe. Others were simply handed over to local employers.⁵ contract workers

where they acquired land. At the same time, Creoles from this archipelago became planters in neighbouring Fernando Pó.⁷

Equatorial Guinea's postcolonial period

Possibly during World War II Santomeans began to emigrate in larger numbers to neighbouring Fernando Pó. By the 1960s this immigrant community was constituted by a few hundred people. Most of them worked in the trade, administration, or as foremen on the local cocoa plantations. At home the Santomeans had never been considered as "natives" (indígenos) under the Portuguese indigenato regime applied to non assimilated Angolans, Guineans, and Mozambicans until 1961. However, it was not before 1953 that Portugal formally excluded the native Creole population of São Tomé and Príncipe from the indigenato status and

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integrated the first post colonial governments. Still today, in São Tomé and Príncipe, this founder generation is known as the “Generation of Santa Isabel”.

Meanwhile, in Fernando Pó the Santomean community was increasingly affected by the hostile measures of the Macías Nguema regime against foreigners. Many returned directly to São Tomé. Others were evacuated together with other foreigners by the Spanish Red Cross and taken to the Canary Islands. From there some moved on to Spain, while others eventually returned to São Tomé.

During the socialist one party regime, in May 1982, São Tomé’s National Popular Assembly approved a series of bilateral agreements with Equatorial Guinea, including a general agreement of economic, scientific, and technical cooperation, a trade agreement, agreements of air and sea transport, and a treaty of friendship and good neighbourhood.⁹ President Pinto da Costa had signed these agreements during an official visit to Malabo on 17 February 1982. However, it seems that very little of these intentions were made true at that time. In the beginning the Equatorial Guinean ship ‘Acácio Mañé’ that maintained a monthly service between Malabo and Annobón had also a stop over in São Tomé. When this boat was destroyed by a fire the sea link between the two countries ceased to exist. There has never been any regular flight connection between the two countries. Likewise, there was no Equatorial Guinean embassy in São Tomé nor a Santomean embassy in Malabo. There was only a honorary consul of São Tomé and Príncipe in Malabo, Freitas Maquengo, a member of the local Santomean

in Malabo.

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a site for a future Santomean embassy in Malabo.¹¹ During his visit Menezes invited Obiang to participate as observer in the 5th summit of the CPLP to be held in São Tomé in July that year.

In July 2005 Teodoro Obiang was one of the four African heads of state that attended São Tomé and Príncipe's 30th anniversary of independence celebrations. In late August of the same year, São Tomé and Malabo signed a security pact aimed at controlling clandestine immigration and drug trafficking and guaranteeing the security of maritime and air traffic. Besides, the safety of the offshore oilrigs was another priority of the agreement. The two countries had been hit by coup attempts in July 2003 and March 2004 respectively, which had been the principal motive behind the bilateral agreement. In the same year, São Tomé appointed an ambassador for Malabo, who has been resident in Abuja, while Equatorial Guinea appointed a resident ambassador for São Tomé in 2006. Before that, Malabo's ambassador to São Tomé was resident in Libreville, Gabon.

However, the relations between São Tomé and Malabo and those of the two countries' heads of state intensified only after the end of the presidency of Olusegun Obasanjo in Nigeria, in May 2007. President Menezes had enjoyed a cordial relationship with Obasanjo since his own election into office in 2001. Obasango's successor, Umaru Yar'Adua, has never maintained a similar personal relationship with Fradique de Menezes. There is no doubt that Menezes's relations with Obiang intensified after Obasanjo's departure. Since 2007 President Obiang has visited São Tomé regularly and Equatorial Guinea's aid to São Tomé has increased considerably.

In 2007, in response to a request by Menezes, Malabo executed rehabilitation works of the road linking the capital with Porto Alegre in the impoverished south of São Tomé island. In that year, for the first time, the official commemoration of São Tomé and Príncipe's independence on 12 July was celebrated in Porto Alegre. The event was attended by President Obiang and the presidents of Gabon and Congo Brazzaville, Omar Bongo and Sassou Nguesso respectively. At that time, however, the repair works executed by an Equatorial Guinean company had not yet been completely finished.¹²

On 25 May 2007, at the invitation of President Menezes, Obiang arrived for a three day visit to São Tomé

arrived for

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solve an emergency food crisis.¹³ The aid shipment included 7 tons of rice, 1,000 cans of condensed milk and 10 boxes of vegetable oil. The commodities were marketed by local traders, while the proceeds from these sales would be used to finance pro poor investments.¹⁴

At the 39th anniversary of Equatorial Guinea's independence, on 12 October 2007, the resident ambassador in São Tomé, Antonio Ebade Ayingono, accredited since May 2006, held a cocktail reception at the Hotel Miramar to commemorate the event. At the reception, the ambassador announced the creation of a joint commission between the two countries to discuss co operation in the agriculture, tourism, fishing, and telecommunications sectors. He also declared the embassy's intention to establish a local association of the Equatorial Guinean community in São Tomé and Príncipe.¹⁵

On 29 February 2008 the two countries signed in Malabo a general co operation agreement in the health, education, transport, forest, oil and infrastructure sectors. President Menezes announced that Malabo would open a credit line for his country. The agreement also constituted a joint commission of the two countries to define the concrete aid measures.

During the signing of the contract, President Obiang proposed the joint exploration of an oil block allegedly situated at the maritime border between the two countries.¹⁶ However, a few days later, then Prime Minister Patrice Trovoada denied that the bilateral agreement included any deal about the joint exploration of oil blocks. São Tomé's National Oil Agency (ANP) added that the agreement on the maritime borders signed in 2000

It seems that initiatives by Equatorial Guinea in the infrastructure, transport sectors and the labour market have not been a great deal of success either. In April 2007 São Tomé's then minister of public works, Delfim Neves, announced that the Equatorial Guinean construction company Obras SA had been selected to build a new port and airport in Príncipe. Under the established agreement, the company would not charge anything for the works, but would be instead entitled to manage the infrastructure during 35 years,

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Despite the close relationship of the two heads of state and the increase of aid received from Equatorial Guinea since 2007, São Tomé's government does not consider Equatorial Guinea as one of the country's principal partners for development. Shortly after his inauguration in June 2008, Prime Minister Rafael Branco declared that he considered Angola, Brazil, and Portugal as his country's closest allies. It is possible that São Tomé and Príncipe will not join the CFA zone either. In 2008 and 2009 the IMF and other foreign experts recommended São Tomé to peg the national currency dobra to the euro, at the detriment of the CFA franc.

The Community of Portuguese speaking countries – CPLP

As already explained, in 2004 São Tomé was instrumental when the Obiang regime successfully approached the Community of Portuguese speaking Countries (CPLP). Modelled on the examples of the Commonwealth and La Francophonie, in 1996 in Lisbon, after seven years of negotiations, the CPLP was formally created by Portugal, Brazil, Angola, Mozambique, Guinea Bissau, Cape Verde and São Tomé and Príncipe. East Timor, once gained its independence from Indonesia in May 2002, became the CPLP's eighth member state. The CPLP's headquarter is based in Lisbon. According to its own regulations the CPLP is ruled by principal objectives that include the non interference in the internal affairs of the member states, but also the priority of

During the annual meeting of the Council of Ministers in Luanda in 2005 the CPLP created the status of associated observer that was attributed to Equatorial Guinea at the 6th summit of the CPLP in Bissau in 2006, together with Mauritius. Malabo's declared objective has been to become a full member of the CPLP. However, a country can only become a full member of the lusophone community if Portuguese is its official language. In order to meet this requirement, Obiang announced the adoption of Portuguese as his country's third official language, after Spanish and French. The imposition of Portuguese as official language seems as absurd as that of French in

that his country wanted to fully join the CPLP at the next summit in 2010, but said the country had not yet fixed a date for the introduction of Portuguese as official language; if not done so, the CPLP would lose a good opportunity to get one more member state. Although Portuguese is not yet introduced, on the official website of the CPLP the language is already listed as Equatorial Guinea's third official language, after Spanish and French. While in Lisbon, Ondo Bile signed an agreement on the support to the introduction of Portuguese as optional language in Equatorial Guinea's education system. Under this agreement, in the short term, the two countries would present an action plan with public and private financing for the project, and prepare the initial training of teachers for Portuguese as foreign language. "Our citizens must speak Portuguese, so that we can belong to the CPLP. It is not difficult for the government declares it official language, but I don't know if it makes much sense to simply declare it official if nobody speaks it" Ondo Bile stated.

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