Nigeria and Afrocentrism: An Assessment of Nigeria’s Role in the Gambian Election Crisis.

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ABSTRACT
Afrocentrism, that is, the complete placement of Africa as the centerpiece of Nigeria’s foreign policy has been the defining characteristic of Nigerian foreign policy since independence. Nigeria has participated in numerous peacekeeping missions both in Africa and outside the continent. Gambian electoral crisis presented a good opportunity for Nigeria to demonstrate its foreign policy commitment by intervening in the dispute to broker peace. Having rejected a result he earlier accepted, the stage was set for physical confrontation between President Jammel’s military, Adama Barrow’s supporters and the ECOWAS contingent determined to enforce the wishes of Gambians, even via the means of war. This article assesses the role played by Nigeria as the strongest military power in the sub-region and in line with its foreign policy thrust. It is the conclusion of this article that Nigeria performed remarkably well in setting the stage for dialogue, accepting to go on mediation talks, and deploying its military in accordance with the agreement reached through the auspices of ECOWAS. The article aligns with the school of thought which claimed that Nigeria’s conduct was spot on in the manner human and material resources were brilliantly expended for the duration of the dispute in the Gambia. The article uses content analysis method, and relies completely on secondary sources.

Keywords: Afrocentrism, Nigerian Foreign Policy, Gambia, Election Crisis

INTRODUCTION
Nigeria has always prides itself as pursuing an elaborate foreign policy thrust which covers the whole of Africa, and even countries in the artificially constructed South-South states. Beginning from the early 1960s, Nigeria has undertaken series of peacekeeping missions, intervention in crisis zones, and even offer subsidised prices of petrol to some African government to help engender stability and economic development. In the year of its birth as a sovereign state, Nigeria participated actively and contributed 1,000 strong Nigerian troops to the United Nations organised peacemaking programme in Congo (Eze 2009). In executing these tasks of promoting Africa’s interest and well-being, the overriding objective of the government is geared towards achieving its foreign policy goals, without assessing the enormous amount of sacrifices – both in human and material – it cost to continually spend resource without giving a thought about implementing zero-sum principle.

Gambia is one of the least populated countries in West Africa, with a population of 2 million people. Gambia has an agrarian economy, with groundnut (peanut) the main foreign exchange earner. With the contracting production of groundnut, tourism has overtaken groundnut as the mainstay of the Gambia’s economy. Livestock production crop farming complement resources generated from groundnut and tourism. The country comprises of the Mandinka (Malinke), who make up an estimated 42%’ the Fula
accounts for 18%, the Wolof 16%, Jola10%, Serahuli9% (The Gambia 2007). As a former colony of Britain, English is the lingua franca of the Gambia, with additional 21 languages spoken across towns, districts, and villages. Gambians are predominantly Muslims, with Christianity accounting for only about 9%. However, the Gambian constitution provided for freedom of worship, and rarely does religious conflict occur in the country.

After independence from Britain in 1960, democratic government ruled the Gambia until the 1994 military coup which ended the civilian rule and instituted a brief military government that lasted only two years. However, opposition from Gambians forced the coup leader, Yahya Jammel, to abandon the impression of ruling as a military junta and contested election as a candidate which, as expected, he emerged winner.

For the past 22 years, Gambians have known and seen no other leader than Yahya Jammel. Through dictatorial methods and muzzling of the opposition, Jammel perpetuates himself on power and became a life president of the Gambia. But events took dramatic shape in December 2016 election in a manner unforeseen before. In neighbouring countries – such as Senegal, Nigeria, Ghana among others – incumbents have been defeated by opposition leaders and they surrendered without instigating political instability, except in Cote d’ Ivoire, where President Gbagbo refused to hand over power to Alassane Quattara. Out of the eight contestants jostling to unseat President Jammel from office, seven collapsed their ambition in a grand alliance that produced Adama Barrow and one other contestant to challenge President Jammel.

Like Gbagbo before him, Jammel decided to create unnecessary political turmoil instead accepting the verdict of the people he had ruled for an unbroken twenty-two years. His inability to find support in any state in West Africa and the number of states supporting Adama Barrow reveal the isolation suffered by President Jammel. ECOWAS machinery headed by Nigeria and Senegal swiftly moved into action to forestall violations of human rights. Senegal offered Adama Barrow brief asylum and moved its troops close to the border with the Gambia. Nigeria offered dialogue on the platform of ECOWAS and deployed troops when mediation failed to produce breakthrough.

The concern of this article, therefore, is to examine Nigeria’s role in the Gambian election debacle vis-à-vis to its foreign policy thrust, which places Africa as the epicenter of Nigerian foreign policy.

**Nigeria’s Foreign Policy Thrust**

Nigeria is an African economic and political powerhouse, even though the West African country has continuously failed to productively maximize its potential to become even more a prosperous and stable state in the continent. Nevertheless, Nigeria still plays a remarkably significant role in the international community, especially in the areas of dispute resolution and peacekeeping missions. Nigeria’s source of inspiration was apparently derived from the groundwork instituted by independence leaders, who enthroned Africa as the centerpiece of Nigeria foreign policy. Political independence was gotten at a period when many African countries were under the crude exploitative and predatory networks of European colonialists, and few European states were reluctant to submit to the gale of freedom that was blowing in all corners of the world.

It became a moral duty for Nigeria to lead the vanguard of decolonisation movement in Africa, providing moral, material, educational, and financial support. This practice was properly concretised during the oil boom of the early 1970s; for example, when Gen. Yakubu Gowon declared Nigeria’s willingness to eradicate colonialism in South Africa (Lamido 2014). This was crystallised in an address delivered to the United Nations General Assembly by Prime Minister Tafawa Belawa which unequivocally enjoined all states to work harmoniously towards the eradication of all forms of inequality and the lessen of ideologies that divide rather than assist developing countries to attain economic and political Independence.

Nigeria does intend to ally itself as a member of routine with
Any of the ideological power blocs and Nigeria hopes to work
With other states for the progress of Africa and to assist in bringing
All other African territories to a state of responsible independence
Nigeria’s decision to put African issues and plight on the front burner was conceived as a task which if properly articulated and executed as the ability of serving the overall interest of Nigeria this, among other things, includes the need to remove Western influence and control, and to deepen cooperation and partnership between developing countries. Colonialism was therefore seen as one of the impediments hampering developing countries from achieving complete liberation and independence. In the thinking of Nigeria’s welders of power, aligning with the capitalist West was one of the fastest ways to secure economic and political freedom, while disregarding socialism and the entire East as incompatible to African ethos and worldview. As glowingly stated by General Ironsi, in the whole sphere of external relations, the Government attaches greatest importance to our African policy (Onyeisi 2011).

In a speech at the United Nations’ General Assembly crystallizing the foreign policy trajectory to be pursued by Prime Minister Tafawa Belawa almost completely concentrated his attention on issues that affect African states with little comment on Nigeria’s position on the dominant international problem. Belawa’s speech was not an oversight; in fact, it was believed that Nigeria’s greatness should and must be projected first on the continent before emerging on the global scene. Furthermore, the influence of socialism in West Africa was beginning to have serious implication on Nigeria’s expected leadership role in the sub-region, with Ghana and Guinea, for example, coming under the web of the aggressively expanding world socialist movement. Therefore, Prime Belawa importuned world leaders and listeners of his speech to accept his seemingly obsession on African issues, thus:

So far I have concentrated on the problems of Africa. Please do not think we are not interested in the problems of the world, we are interestingly interested in them and hope to be allowed to assist in finding solutions to this organisation but being human, we are naturally concerned first with what affects our immediate neighbour.

Belawa’s plead to be allowed to provide solutions to immediate problems which are local, have seen Nigeria embark on a more comprehensive, expensive, difficult assignment in the world and Africa. Truly, such was the ideal thought of Nigeria’s founding fathers: a Nigeria, whose presence and power is felt and feared on the continent, being able to solve issues and provide solutions to problems, without making economic and strategic demands on what the state will benefit from embarking on such endeavour. Successive constitutions in 1979, 1989, and 1999, nonetheless, have retained the idea of placing Nigeria’s foreign policy thrust on Africa (Adedeji 1976).

Nigeria’s policy on Africa goes beyond the sponsorship and support of decolonisation movements to bilateral agreements, joint cooperation, and treaties of friendship, all these conceived with the spirit of African brotherhood. Nweke quoted President Obasanjo’s statement that the total of Nigeria’s expenditure on ECOMOG operations in West African sub-region was in the excess of US $12 billion (Nweke 2010).

However, the tenet of Nigeria’s foreign policy is continuously and vehemently being challenged and criticised by scholars of Nigerian foreign policy and interested laymen. A number of reasons account for the critical assessment Nigeria’s foreign policy has received. First, most, if not all, African states that received Nigerian favour rarely show they appreciated Nigeria’s unstinting goodwill and love for them. This has made Nigerians to question the merit of sacrificing human and material resources for people who are ungrateful and mean, and takes delight in sabotaging the interest of Nigeria in continental and international politics. Second, the cavalier attitude of the Nigerian government to Nigerians, especially those overseas has exposed Nigeria’s practice of foreign policy without the people, as inadequate, unprincipled, and travesty. While it is a common practice in international politics that foreign policy of a state is conducted at the behest of the people; governments are therefore empowered by law to pursue material and non-material objectives which align with the ethos and interest of the people.

It is on this note that the call for the disregard of Africa as the centerpiece of Nigeria’s foreign policy is made; whereby the government would focus almost entirely on domestic issues at home and on the plight of Nigerians overseas, and allow the impact to radiate freely on the continent and the world. To reduce
our intervention in Africa, a call to implement Citizen Diplomacy (Ogunsanwo 2009) is already generating interest and support. Since the intention of Nigeria’s power show in Africa is to establish its presence strongly; it is argued that weak economic base and outdated concept of foreign policy are inevitably counter-productive and constitute pitfalls that stand on Nigeria’s pathway to true greatness. If, for example, Nigerian economy becomes viable, diversified, and vibrant with little dependency on crude oil, and the motive of the government is geared towards securing the life of the people – whether at home or abroad – the aggregation of these factors will unleash Nigeria more forcefully and majestically on the psyche of every African.

The Political Dynamics in Gambia
The socio-economic and Political trajectory in the Gambia followed a similar pattern in African history, which fails to produce strong and effective institutions, functional social infrastructures, and societal leaders, unwittingly created a platform for dictatorship, one-party system, military intervention, etc. Although many reasons account for military intervention in African politics, ineffective institutions and weak political culture are always present in any state that has witnessed the overthrow of democratically elected leaders. Like many before him, President Jammel unleashed a debilitating dictatorship which saw his hold on power lasts twenty-two unbroken years. A 1994 coup ended thirty years of democratic rule in the Gambia, and President Jammel quickly set up the Armed Forces Provisional Ruling Council (AFPRC); ruled by decree, suspended the constitution and ban all political parties. Those who openly challenged his method of governance were either jailed or killed in mysterious circumstances. In other to be eligible to compete in elections after principled oppositions to his proposal, President Jammel decided to contest election as a civilian, giving up his military career (Sanyang and Camara 2017).

Gambia in the last twenty-two years had been everything about President Jammel’s bid to consolidate his hold on power; his increasingly desire to remain in power and the tweaking of Gambia’s constitution to guarantee his seemingly unchallengeable and terrifying persona. For instance, an early change made to the Gambia’s electoral law after his successful coup had accorded franchise to Gambians of eighteen years and above, and to all Gambians in the diaspora (Sanyang and Camara 2017). Now, twenty years later, this law was amended patently to deny Gambians outside the country voting rights due to intense and increased criticisms of President Jammel’s government, and his unfounded belief that shutting out Gambians in the diaspora was the easiest way to secure political victory. Gambia’s electoral law reflected all the ills country. Colonial systems of voting, for example, works with marbles and ballot drums that have the various party colors and candidates (sic) portraits of attached to them (Sanyang and Camara 2017). The government has refused all appeal to reform the voting method since it gives room for manipulation and rigging. Part of oppositions’ complaints was that collation venues are government-owned houses which make it easy for the government to continuously have it ways in election. The December 2016 election saw the biggest coalition of opposition parties to challenge President Yahya Jammel’s dictatorship. Other than the forming a coalition to unseat President Jammel, there was little prospects that their effort will produce meaningful result. In one of his widely quoted comments, President Jammel boasted of the invincibility and interminability of his reign in Gambia to the BBC, to “rule this country for one billion years […] if Allah says so” (Hartman 2017) Prior to the election President Jammel had already shown his egregious trademark by jailing opposition leader Ousainou Darboe and 19 others for simply having participated in a demonstration calling for political reforms in April 2016 (Hartman 2017). So, little did Gambians and the oppositions know that they are about making a landmark change in the political history of The Gambia, with lasting, sweeping results.

Yahya Jammel and the Election
It took five elections, beginning from 1996 to unseat President Jammel from power. Yahya Jammel was clearly grossly insatiable in the unbroken twenty-two years he had held the Gambia at the jugular. He had successfully turned Gambia into a fiefdom, and nearly completely silenced all voices of dissent, with many people forced into exile. However, he was caught in a warp of time, as many states in Africa had
witnessed the defeat of incumbent leaders – Nigeria and Ghana, for example – something previously not so widespread in a continent where leaders are notorious at manipulating the laws to produce favourable results and perpetuate them in power. Nevertheless, Africa, especially West Africa, has a lot sterling examples to prove the renewed hope in democratic process and the willingness of defeated incumbent to accept defeat and relinquish power.

Apart from the increased demonstration of resentment by voters in the sub-region, the political atmosphere in Gambia was not dissimilar to previous elections that had returned President Jammel as winner. As a tradition since 1996, he had all government machineries, including the police, army, even and the electoral commission to his side. People who openly expressed dissatisfaction with the level of electoral reforms were rounded up and clamped into detention, to pave way for an expected unchallenged victory. This is not to discount the belief of opposition leaders in forming an alliance to challenge Jammel’s interminable hold on power, and his atrocious, erratic conducts. If forming alliance was all that was required the 2006 alliance formed by some political parties in the Gambia would have resulted in a landslide victory for the opposition. Instead, he pulled through, spending more ten incredible years on power. However, in 2016, voters consciousness and education have increased drastically; a fact brilliantly exploited by the opposition parties.

On December 1, the Gambia people displayed a total rejection of his government by electing an opposition leader, Adama Barrow as president. The result announced by Gambia’s Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) shows that Adama Barrow won 263, 515 votes (45%); Jammel got 212, 099 votes (36.7%), Mama Kandeh won 102, 969 votes (17.8%), showing clearly that the opposition has for the first time in the Gambia’s history defeated the ruling party (BC News 2016). At first, it seems like President Jammel would imitate the lofty precedents seen in Nigeria and Ghana, where incumbent leaders accepted defeats and phoned their opponents, preventing their state from collapsing into an orgy of bloodbath, and refrain from over hitting the polity through convoluted and opaque legal battles in court. President Jammel, even before the results of the election were fully announced, decided to concede defeat to his opponent through a phone call, and wished him well for the days ahead. In statement that depicted political maturity and statesmanship, President Jammel averred, ‘I take this opportunity to congratulate Mr. Adama for his victory. It’s a clear victory. I wish him all the best and I wish all Gambians the best (Onuoha and E. C. Ngwu). He speedily relaxed political tension with the release of political prisoners from detention such as Ousainou Darbor and 18 others (Adekunle 2017). The implication of Jammel’s unexpected concessionary statement was far-reaching in the political history of the Gambia. It immediately elicited widespread jubilation in the Gambia for many reasons. First, the will of the people for the first in the Gambia has prevailed and a new party and government have been voted into power. Second, many expected the government to outright reject the result and seek to upturn the electoral verdict through the court. However, it was short-lived. The electoral body admitted to have been impaired by technical irregularities and embarked on vote recount which still secured defeat for Jammel and victory for Barrow, although, this time, with a narrow margin. Indeed, citing the prevalence of ‘unacceptable abnormalities’ in the entire electoral process, President Jammel recanted his concession speech and rejected the result of the election, four days later. Jammel’s belief must have engendered by the knowledge that both section of the 1997 constitution and section 100 of the Elections Act of Gambia unambiguously stipulated that an election petition is the means of adjudicating any election dispute in the country (Gambian Electoral Act). Clearly, the provisions of the laws were seemingly in his favour, and with the knowledge that the judiciary will cower at his barks undergirded his uncharacteristic recourse to the law.

However, while President Jammel chose to use legal means to seek redress over what he conceives as severe injustice, the entire continent of Africa, especially members of ECOWAS, were united and unequivocal in their position on the election. ECOWAS did not mince words when it issued a statement of condemnation on the government of the Gambia, called for respect to the people’s verdict and sought protection to the President-elect, Adama Barrow. It is fundamental that the verdict of the ballots should be respected,
and that the security of the president-elect, Adama Barrow, and that of all Gambian citizens be fully ensured (ECOWAS 2016).

ECOWAS established Electoral Assistance Unit in 2005 as a platform responsible to enhance good governance and increase political participation of the people through the observation elections of its member states. However, the Electoral Assistance Unit must be invited before it could participate in the election of a member state. This invitation was, however, not extended to this institution by President Jammel.

Assessing the Role Played by Nigeria

In keeping with its policy of promoting African interest and intervening in any state under threat of any kind, just like Nigeria had intervened in Sao Tome and Principe and formed synergy with Cote d’ Ivoire after the coup of 1999, the imprints of Nigeria were everywhere in the Gambian post-election crisis. Political disagreement had threatened to throw the Gambia into a vicious circle of political crisis in 2006, following the charged political atmosphere that coincided with the formation of new political alliances. Nigeria’s response to the polluted political environment in the Gambia was the timely intervention of President Obasanjo to settle the dispute and find lasting solution to their differences. With his diplomatic efforts, a Memorandum of Understanding was signed by which both the ruling Alliance for Patriotic Reorientation and Construction and National Alliance for Democracy pledged to forget the transgressions of the past and ensure that the 2006 polls would be free, fair, and credible. Again, the heightened nature of the post-election crisis in Gambia in 2016 provides wider canvas – such as, the widespread and acceptance of democratic culture both in the defeat of the incumbent government and in legislations that express support for good governance – and falls in line with Nigeria’s Afrocentric policy.

The first step taken by Nigeria after President Jammel had disputed the result he had earlier accepted and refused to hand over power to the winner Adama Barrow, was to participate in a joint ECOWAS mediation team made up of chairperson Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, John Dramani Mahama, Ernest Bai Koroma, and President Mohamadu Buhari. The mission of this team, however, did not achieve the objective of ECOWAS, thereby leaving the commission with the possibility of engaging with a more credible and decisive plan. At this point, little impact has been made by the United Nations or the African Union; the Gambian election debacle was conceived as purely a sub-regional problem needing a homegrown solution.

At a regular ECOWAS meeting in Abuja Nigerian and Ghanaian Presidents Mohamadu Buhari and John Mahama sought the support of the UN and the AU, and pledged to continue mediation with the Gambian leader. Even as ECOWAS leaders have approved January 19 as the inauguration of President-elect, Adama Barrow, according to Gambian constitution, the visit made by President Buhari to convince President Jammel to step down on 14 January, did not produce fruitful result. At this juncture, therefore, it became clear that only military action will get President Jammel out of power, and ECOWAS leaders were contemplating using force, especially as the inauguration deadline draws close.

Nigeria played host for the preparation of the establishment of the ECOWAS Military Intervention in The Gambia (ECOMIG), by ECOWAS’s Chief of Staff, on 14 January. The successes of past ECOWAS-inspired operations in Liberia and Sierra Leone must have informed the rapid formation of this intervention outfit. Together with other countries, Nigeria joined a naval blockade of The Gambia. The air force of Nigeria took over the air space of the Gambia in a bid to forestall President Jammel from using his air force, or attack the approaching ECOWAS contingent. Throughout the duration of the political imbroglio, the Nigerian air force enforced a no-fly zone in the Gambia.

The altruistic foreign policy principle of Nigeria was aptly noted by Christof Hartmann when he posited that ‘Nigeria claimed leadership of the mediation and participated in the military intervention without any clear material interests in the small country.’ Of course, it was not a claim without substance. Even if the Gambia has huge material and economic interest to be exploited, it is against the foreign policy norms of Nigeria to assist sister African country with the motive of reaping any kind of reward. One of the
criticisms against Nigerian foreign policy is the practice of playing the function of a big brother, who thinks less and less of himself, but is more concern about the welfare of others. Nigeria’s conduct in the post-election crisis in the Gambia reveals the position of Nigeria as the hegemon in West Africa, especially the unity of purpose displayed by West African states, even when Senegal was eager to invade the Gambia and forcefully eject President Jammel, perhaps to settle old scores. Senegal showed unprecedented eagerness by moving its troops close to the border, even when ECOWAS was exploring the possibility of making President Jammel make concession and step down. Since Nigeria is the biggest financer of ECOWAS and has the organisation’s headquarters in its capital, all ECOWAS policy statements bear the approval of Nigeria. There was no record of undue interference by Nigeria, or pursuing a predetermined objective – something almost always attributed to regional hegemons. The leadership style of Nigeria ensured that all parties involved in the conflict – it was even extended to all countries of the world that has the resource to broker peace and save Gambians from the imminent scourge of war – were carried along to the extent that a last minute compromise was reached by an unlikely source, President of Guinea Abdul Aziz.

ECOWAS and Nigeria deserved to claim the victory for forestalling yet another round of crisis inspired by the inability to accept defeat by incumbent leaders in Africa. African leaders are notorious for personalisation of power which translates to deification and produces in the minds of these leaders’ dictatorship and sit-tight mentality.

CONCLUSION
Intervention in the socio-political affairs of African countries has an enduring tradition in the lexicon of Nigerian foreign policy. Huge amount of resources – both human and material – have been sacrificed by Nigeria to ensure that the fragile peace in most countries in Africa is not threatened. Nigeria’s unprecedented altruism can never be compared with any state in international politics, a practice that is vehemently being challenged by Nigerians for many reasons.

ECOWAS’s successful intervention in The Gambia post-election conflict provides a veritable example for the African Union to emulate when intervening in any country plagued with post-election dispute, especially if the electoral umpire had declared a candidate the winner. The Gambia’s territorial integrity was thoroughly breached by ECOWAS member-states on land, water, and in the air, and President Jammel was completely surrounded on all fronts. The tense atmosphere in The Gambia aggravated with the continuous defection of President Jammel’s Ministers and officials of his government calling for his removal. For instance, President-elect, Adama Barrow was sworn in as president of The Gambia in the Embassy of the Gambia in Senegal, with international approval. As the deadline approaches, a visibly powerless and helpless Jammel had to accept a last-minute deal offered by the President of Guinea, Abdul Aziz, or face the firepower of ECOWAS.

Intervention in The Gambia was perhaps the least expensive of all Nigeria’s attempt to broker peace in Africa. Apart from the unanimous recognition of Adama Barrow by members of ECOWAS, some member-states especially Senegal, played remarkable role in piling pressure on President Jammel to step down. At the end, compromise was reached, Jammel stepped down and fled into exile, and Barrow became president of The Gambia.

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