

## HISTORICING THE MARITIME DOMAIN AND SECURITY IN THE GULF OF GUINEA (1435-2025)

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### Abstract

*The maritime domain of the Niger Delta area is a part of the larger Gulf of Guinea which houses the Atlantic Ocean, played significant roles in the navigation and development of the area and its legacies abound, till today. This research found out that the Portuguese were the first set of Europeans that explored and navigated the Gulf of Guinea, in 1435 when were they encouraged other explorers to embark on the voyage in the area. The Portuguese established permanent settlements and also set up large plantations for the cultivation of cash crops, such as melon, banana, cassava, coconuts and other fruit which abound in the area. The paper also found out that the Portuguese dominion of the gulf of guinea was later challenged by other European countries including France, Britain, Germany and others, and this heightened the obnoxious Trans Atlantic slave trade, catering away millions of Africans for over 350 years from the Gulf of Guinea into the new world. The British parliament set up a maritime security outfit, the squadron that patrol the Atlantic Ocean and impounded any ship loaded with slaves and return to Freetown in the Sierra Leone. Today, the security situation in the Gulf of Guinea remained worrisome due to the menace of illegal transactions by pirates and several cartels operating in the water. This paper is the historicity of the maritime domain of the Gulf of Guinea pioneered by the Portuguese five hundred and seventy nine years ago. The paper proffered that the Portuguese plantation economy can be resuscitated and sustained with the aim of diversification of the economic base of Nigeria. Similarly, countries bordering the Gulf of Guinea can come together under a commission to counter the menace of pirates in the waters of the Gulf of Guinea.*

### Introduction

#### **The Gulf of Guinea before the Portuguese Penetration**

Before the Europeans notably the Portuguese interactions with the people of the Gulf of Guinea, the area was already an entity or a world of its own. By this time issues of migration was near completion and people had already settled in groups of ethnic affiliations with a definite boundary, language and culture. At this time each of the ethnic groups had a unique political system (Utin, 2018:8). Apart from the fact that people migrated to other areas, it is safe to say that some were left behind and where not moved to other areas. It is in this regard that Buah (1974:9) states that some people have always lived in where they are today. We may safely assume that most peoples of the western

Sudan in about eleventh century AD had lived in these areas for several thousands of years.

Some groups of people of the area of the Gulf of Guinea included the Tuareg, the Fulani, the Mande speaking people, the Mossi, the Almoravids, Songhai, the Hausa, Kanuri, and the Kanem borno people. As time progresses, some of the ethnic groups became powerful kingdoms and later empires equally emerged. Some of the powerful kingdoms and empires were the Oyo empire, Asante empire, Benin kingdom, Ghana empire, Songhai empire as well as the Mali empire. It is also noted that some areas in the gulf of Guinea were unable to organize themselves as kingdoms or empires. Such areas became city States. Such areas included the old Calabar and the Ijaw

communities of Nembe, Kalabari and the Bonny people. The Atlantic slave trade was quite prominent in the area and therefore needed a more formal political organization to direct the affairs of communities. The Atlantic slave trade affected the political institutions, trading patterns and inter-group relations of the people of the area, Akpan (2010:9).

Similarly, some areas in the gulf of Guinea operated simple governance structure in the form of village assembly. Political organization in the area was segmentary and genealogically based. Political organization was organized in different units such as families, wards, villages and clans. British anthropologist allegedly classifies the area as stateless societies because of lack centralized government. The Ibibio and the Igbo people of Nigeria, the Jola and the Pepel in Senegal and other communities in the area adopted the village democracy, (Akpan, 2010:11). With a strong political organization, there was equally need for a strong source of income for the people of the Gulf of Guinea. At first it was farming, hunting, fishing and pottery making were the major source of livelihood for the people and these occupation in turn, carters for the needs of the people. However, surplus were usually exchanged through local trade and long distant trade, some people travelled outside the State to buy their product, (Utin, 2018:66). The progress of the society resulted in the advent of local industries for the processing of fish, salt, soap, cloth, leather, and distillery. During the 15<sup>th</sup> century a new form of trade emerged in the gulf of Guinea. This was the slave trade. This trade became the centre of attention attracting the Europeans into the Gulf of Guinea.

### **Advent of the Linkages between the Portuguese and the Gulf of Guinea**

Portugal traces its origin to to 24<sup>th</sup> June 1128, the date of the battle of Sao Mamede. After the battle, Alfonso proclaimed himself prince of Portugal and in 1139 he assumes the title

king of Portugal. In 1143 the kingdom of Leon recognized him as king of Portugal by the treaty of Zamora. Algrave, the southernmost province of Portugal was conquered from the Moors in 1249 and in 1255 Lisbon became its capital city. During the late Middle Ages in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries Portugal ascended the status of a world power during Europe's age of discovery when it built up a vast empire including its empire in the Gulf of Guinea.

Portugal linkages with the gulf of Guinea started during the period of the trans Saharan. Having obtained information on the economic gains of the trans Saharan trade between Western Sudan and the Arab world, Portugal wanted to be part of the trade. The strategic location of Portugal which is in southern Europe and close to the Arabs in the north of Africa gave them advantage over other European countries. However, the Muslims in North Africa constrained the Portuguese from using the trans Saharan route. In 1420s the Portuguese had devised another route to counter the Muslims of North Africa and their monopoly of the Trans Saharan trade. An alternative route was the use of the Atlantic Ocean in which they also share with Africa. This initiative was devised by Prince Henry the Navigator. The explorers were given full support and encouragement by the Portuguese monarch. At first the progress was slow but when Gill Eanes in 1435 sailed pass cape Bajador and returned safely, other explorers were encouraged to embark on the voyage. Cape Bajador was a point of fear by sailors who feared that they would never return from the sea of darkness. The success by Gill Eanes erased the fear factor and marked a major turning point in the progress of navigation along the African route. The successful attempt by Eanes inspired other Portuguese explorers who reached the entire Guinea Coast within three decades. Ten years later ie after 1535, the Portuguese reached Cape Verde Island, this feat was reached by Diniz Diaz.

Between 1445 and 1448 Nuno Tristau and Zarco were at the borders of modern Sierra

Leone and in 1460 Portuguese sailors were at the Shebro Island. In 1471 the Portuguese were in Elmina in modern Ghana and two years later they reached the eastern end of the Gulf of Guinea. In that year Fernao do Po discovered the island of Fernando (Equatorial Guinea) and that same year Ruy de Sequeira reached Sao Tome Island. The two islands in the Niger Delta, the island of Fernando po and the island of Sao Tome enabled the Portuguese to have direct contact with Benin Empire in 1874. The Portuguese were able to reach the mouth of Congo in 1482 and thereafter penetrated the hinterland of the area. With the feat reached by the Portuguese it is safe to conclude that by the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century they had completely traced the coastline of the Guinea Coast up to Angola and also reached India in the far East, Utin (2017:176).

The completion of navigation of the Gulf of Guinea by the Portuguese led to the commencement of economic activities in the area. The Gulf of Guinea was an area rich in agricultural produce such as spices, pepper and also slaves. The climate of some areas was very conducive for the Europeans to established permanent settlement example in Cape Verde Island, Island of Sao Tome and the Island of Fernando po. Economically the centre of the Portuguese economic activities in the upper Guinea was in the Cape Verde Island which was a centre for the supply of slaves. With time Santiago became the most important trading centre which centered mostly on cotton growing and cattle breeding, this took place from 1484, other items for export were livestock, ivory, rice, dyes, hides and skin and cloth. Elmina was another Portuguese trading centre in the lower Guinea. The Port of Elmina served as a route to the Niger Delta trading port in Angola, Mozambique and the far East. The major trading products were slaves exported to Europe and America. The Portuguese also set up large scale plantation for sugar cane and also introduced other agricultural crops to the Gulf of Guinea which included sweet

potato, orange, banana, plantain, pineapple, melon, cassava, cocoyam, coconut and others.

### **Legacy of the Portuguese in the Gulf of Guinea**

The successful arrival of the Portuguese in the sand of the Gulf of Guinea led to the formation of a very large Portuguese Empire in the area. The Portuguese empire lasted for almost 200 years. It is in this regard that Akpan (2010), states that ‘the Portuguese bestrode the Guinea Coast like a colossus and created an empire in Africa’. Therefore it’s safe to include that the Portuguese in its 200 years existence in Africa (Gulf of Africa) created a very large empire. The impact and legacy of the Portuguese are still in existence till today in the Guinea Coast. One of the outstanding legacy of the Portuguese include names of countries and cities in the Guinea Coast. For instance, the name of Sierra Leone Utin (2016:40) was derived from the Portuguese language Serra Lyoa meaning Mountain and Lion, Cameroon was derived from Rio Dos Cameroes which means River of Prawns. In the case of Ghana, the coastal region from where the Portuguese mined gold was named Da Costa da El Mina from which the name Gold Coast was gotten. It should be noted that Gold Coast was Ghana’s first name before it was changed after independence in 1957. Fernando Po was named after the Portuguese explorer Fernao Do Po. Fernandopo is an island in today’s Equatorial Guinea.

The Portuguese also established plantations especially in Sao Tome and Cape Verde Island where they cultivated and introduced new crops to Africa, crops such as banana, plantain, sweet potato, pineapples, cassava, cocoyam, coconut, melon, sugarcane, guava, tangerine, orange, avocado pears, lemon and others. These crops are cultivated all over the Gulf of Guinea; some are staple food in the entire area of Gulf of Guinea e.g Cassava. Portuguese language was a general language in the Gulf of Guinea most especially before colonial rule. Similarly, countries colonized by

Portugal especially Cape Verde Island, Angola, Sao Tome and Principe and Guinea Bissau still speak Portuguese as its official language till today.

### **The Decline of the Portuguese Empire in the Gulf of Guinea**

It should be noted that in 1494, two years after Christopher Columbus first sailed to America, the Spanish and the Portuguese monarchies divided the world among themselves under a treaty called the Treaty of Tordesillas. The treaty established a line from pole to pole, 370 leagues from Cape Verde, Portugal took all the land to the east of the line with exclusive right to explore trade and colonize the area. Spain on the other hand took all the land to the west. The Treaty of Tordesillas was short-lived, this was because other European powers immediately contested against the terms of the treaty, even Portugal went against the treaty by seeking for land beyond its boundaries of Brasil. First to challenge the Treaty of Tordesillas was France. King of France, Francis 1, 1525-1547 was said to have said that he would like to see the clause in Adam's will which excluded his nation from having a share in the treasures of the world. Portugal was a small country, but because of its maritime prowess acquired much territories and immense wealth, this inspired other European countries to challenge them and therefore breached the Treaty of Tordesillas.

It in this regards that European countries such as France, the Netherlands, England, Belgium, Denmark and Switzerland seriously attacked the Portuguese and participated in the acquisition of the resources of the Gulf of Guinea. French sailors attacked Portuguese ships and in 1492 its pirates seized Portuguese ships loaded with gold and pepper enroute to Portugal. Similarly in 1542 a French ship was in Cape three points in Ghana and on returned took 28 kilogram of gold. In 1659, St. Louis was made the first French permanent settlement on the mouth of the Senegal River.

The Dutch attacked and ousted the Portuguese from Elmina in 1637. At the same time, the Dutch aligned with Britain and took over the Niger Delta, Southern Nigeria, Southern Ghana and Sierra Leone. They also challenged the Portuguese in Fernadopo only for Spain to take over the area in 1596. In the mid-17th century the Dutch were in control of major ports in Arguin and Goree in Upper Guinea, Sao Tome in the Niger Delta and Elmina, Shama and Axim in the Gold Coast. Britain was the last European country that also challenged the Portuguese in the Gulf of Guinea. Its explorers led by Thomas Whydham reached Ghana and the Niger Delta. Here they were fascinated by valuable items such as Gold, Silver, pepper and other resources where they took back to Britain in 1553. The British seized a number of Portuguese vessels.

The British established a settlement in Sierra Leone for freed slaves and later became the headquarters of British administration in the Gulf of Guinea. By the end of the 17th century the once powerful Portugal who controlled the entire resources of the Gulf of Guinea like the king of the jungle lost a greater part of its possessions to other European countries. They were left with only Guinea Bissau, the Cape Verde Island, Angola, Sao Tome and Principe. It should be noted that Portugal was the first European that penetrated the Gulf of Guinea in the early 15th century and the last European country to leave the Gulf of Guinea. While other colonial government had granted independence to its colony in the 1960s, Portugal was still holding onto its colonial possession till 1970s. It was the military government that finally abandoned the Portuguese colonial principle and independence was finally granted to Guinea Bissau in 1974 and Cape Verde Island while Angola and São Tomé and Principe got its independence in 1975.

## The Concept of Conflict and Maritime Security

Conflict is an inevitable occurrence due to incompatibility of interest and lack of harmonization of interest and aspiration of members of a particular society. It is in this regard that communities fight over boundary, land ownership and retaliation over an attack or assault on an indigene, some fight over maritime boundary and maritime resources. It is in this regard that Utin (2022:49) states that conflict is endemic, contagious, pandemic and pervasive; its pervasive nature has resulted in destructive manifestations which abound in all strata of the society. Utin (2024:229) also state that there will be no meaningful progress and development during crisis. It should be noted that crisis is a stage in conflict usually characterized by violence leading to loss of lives and properties.

Conflict scholars have avoided definition of conflict and rather analyzed the term conflict based on its manifestation in terms of either a condition or the process of its occurrence. Others analyzed it in term of the natural inclination or genetic makeup of individuals. Johan Galtung analyzed conflict as a condition and therefore stated that in a system conflict has two or more incompatible goals. Lewis Coser on its own sees conflict as a process in the society and therefore stated that it is a struggle over values and claims to scarce status, power and resources in which the aims of the opponent are to neutralize, injure or eliminate their rivals. David Lockwood emphasized that there are mechanisms in the society that makes conflict inevitable and inexorable, that differences in power would result in some groups exploiting, oppress and marginalized others and in the process constitute a source of tension, and conflict in the society. Ralf Dahrendorf stated that societies have two faces those of conflict and consensus, arising from this he submits that the cause of conflict resides from contradictions or conflict of interest in the society. Jessie Bernards contends that conflict arises when there are incompatible or

mutually exclusive goals, aims or values exposed by human beings.

Finally, M. Ross stated that conflict occurs when parties disagree about the distribution of materials or symbolic resources and act because of the incompatibility of goals or a perceived divergence of interest. Similarly Otoabasi Akpan states that the differing values and moral preferences of human groups usually give rise to conflict. Inwang Utin in the same vein sees conflict as a norm in societies and when it prolonged escalate into crisis and may result in eviction of the defeated or weak party from their ancestral homeland Utin (2023:26). When conflicts erupt, parties to it must not fight till eternity; mechanisms have been devised for peaceful settlement of all kinds of conflict. Such mechanisms include negotiation, bargaining, mediation, conciliation and arbitration Utin (2021:98).

Maritime security is a general term that describes the protection and safeguards of vessels both internally and externally. Such protection are in the area of terrorism, piracy, robbery, illegal trafficking of goods and people as well as illegal fishing and pollution. Also, it is a term used to classify issues in the maritime domain that are related to National security, marine environments, economic development and human security. There is no internationally agreed definition of the term maritime security; however, the term has often been used to describe both existing regional and international challenges in the maritime domain. Maritime security has become a global concern to the global shipping industry where there are a lot of security threat and challenges; this includes crimes such as piracy, armed robbery in the sea, trafficking of people and illicit goods, illegal fishing and maritime pollution.

Maritime challenges were experienced during the 17th century when other European countries such as France, Netherland, Britain and others attacked the Portuguese vessel in the waters of the Gulf of Guinea; however this

was not quite intense. Maritime security has become a significant issue since the early 2000s especially when terrorist attack port facilities, this led to the creation of the international ship and port facility security code.

Maritime security concern has been experienced in the Niger Delta of Nigeria following oil exploration by multinational oil companies in the region. The region is facing the problem of oil spillage which destroys aquatic resources in the ocean. It is noteworthy that reckless environmental practices by multinational oil companies, leads to loss of drinking water and outbreak of epidemic. The federal government also fails to provide basic amenities for the people of the area resulting in the formation of militia groups. This militia engages in maritime crime and insurgences involving oil theft, illegal exploration of crude oil in the off shore (bunkering), kidnapping, vandalization of oil pipeline at sea and hostage taking of oil and government officials Utin (2018:64). Bueger (2014:161) also in his analysis of the concepts of maritime security states that maritime security is also linked with economic development, this is because throughout recorded history the ocean were always of vital economic importance. The majority of trade is conducted via the sea and fisheries are a significant industry. The concept of blue economy is linked to maritime security since sustainable management strategies not only require the enforcement and monitoring of laws and regulations, but a secure maritime environment provides the precondition for managing maritime resources closely related to the concept of the blue economy that is needed to understand maritime security in human security. This issue was proposed by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and intends to concentrate security consideration on the needs of the people rather than on States. The main point of human security has to do with food, shelter, sustainable livelihood and safe employment. The fact that fisheries is a vital source of food

and employment especially in the least developed countries, therefore illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing is a major problem impacting human security. Human security has several maritime dimensions which stretch from the security of sea farers to the vulnerability of coastal population to the maritime threats.

### **Historicing the Maritime Domain of the Gulf of Guinea**

Maritime security started in the Gulf of Guinea after the British parliament abolished the slave trade on the 25th march 1807. The act prohibited trade on slaves in the British Empire. The act encouraged other nations to abolish their own slave trade. It took about eighteen years for the passage of the bill. Even though slave trade was abolished, the ships were still loading slaves illegally to Europe. To stop this illegal slave trading, the Great Britain established the West African squadron to enforce its ban on the trade. This was the first attempt at maritime security in the Gulf of Guinea. It was the British Royal navy that established the West African squadron. Initially the ban was applied only to British ships, but Britain negotiated treaties with other countries to give the royal navy the right to intercept and search their ships for slaves. The British navy maintained in West African waters an anti-slave trade squadron of up to 20 ships and between 1825 and 1865 arrested 1,287 slave ships and liberated about 130, 000 slaves. Within the same period about 1.8 million African slaves landed in the Americas.

The abolition of slave trade by the British parliament led to the advent of new form of trade in other commodities. The British government expressed its desire to protect the interests of British merchant trading in other commodities. The British government therefore acquired new political, commercial and missionary presence in West Africa. These new trend led to increasing interference in the domestic affairs of African

societies and their government. It was in this regard that the British naval squadron needed an offshore station to serve as a base for its patrolling ship and as a landing place for slaves after interception. Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century the offshore station was in Sierra Leone, which later became the centre for British political officers and missionaries, (Utin, 2016).

The squadron with its base in Sierra Leone within 60 years of its existence landed 60,000 men and women from all over Western Africa that it had taken from arrested slave ships. Also in 1827 the British Navy also used the island of Fernando Po in the Gulf of Guinea as an alternative base and freed slave settlement. This base was later abandoned in 1834 due to the Spanish government intervention and a legal claim to the island since 1778.

The end of the slave economy led to a new trading pattern in line with the Industrial Revolution. This new trend was the staple economy or legitimate trade. By this time the British who had championed the abolition of slave trade were also the protagonist of the new trade. The new trade focused on agricultural resources needed for industrial production in Europe. This new trend means that West Africans would remain at home to produce the raw materials and also become potential customers for British manufactured goods. This notion by the British industrialist had strong theoretical backing from the renowned economist Adam Smith, who argued that a "free man work more productively than a slave". The Gulf of Guinea and its Atlantic waters was the home of this new economic venture. The European had a dual achievement of making the Gulf of Guinea a source of raw material and also a market for its manufactured goods. Large quantities of palm oil, groundnut, cocoa, gum, ivory, coffee, cotton were shipped via the Atlantic Ocean to Europe. These commodities were bought at very cheap prices by the European merchant. Imports from Europe to the Gulf of Guinea included gun and

gunpowder, tobacco, textile, alcoholic drink, salt, mirror, soap and others. Even though the value of these products were low compared to what the people of the Gulf of Guinea sent to them, it is apt to state that the trade was more humane and beneficial than the dehumanizing slave trade.

### **Contemporary Maritime Security Situation in the Gulf of Guinea**

The Gulf of Guinea presently is facing the menace of pirate attack on merchant vessels and the kidnapping of crew members of vessels. The pirates are usually well armed using high speed boats and sometimes board ships to kidnap crew members. The Gulf of Guinea recorded a total of 95% kidnapping worldwide. The international Maritime organization (IMO) recorded 23 related incidents of piracy and armed robbery against ship in 2021. Tankers, container ships, general cargo vessels and other vessels engaging in oil drilling productions are also attacked. The activities of pirates have become very sophisticated to the extent that when they carry out an attack in the maritime zone of one country, they cross the waters to another country and escape with their loot Corto Real (2022:61).

Studies have also revealed that illegal transactions, trafficking of persons and narcotic drugs are all taking place in the Gulf of Guinea. Drug cartels thrive on the unguarded maritime borders of the Gulf of Guinea together with corrupt law enforcement officers. Most South American cocaine destined for Europe passes through the Gulf of Guinea. Illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing, illicit trade of small arms and light weapons, human trafficking and dumping of toxic waste are the major threats that affect the security and cohesion of the Gulf of Guinea. All these trends are occurring due to lack of control of the waters as well as lack of patrol of coastal waters. Without proper security of the Gulf of Guinea by trained water security outfit such as the Navy and others, the Gulf of Guinea will still

continue to be a major ground for several illegal activities by sea pirates and other bandit that operates in the waters.

### Conclusion

This article examines the maritime domain and security in the Gulf of Guinea since 1435. 2025 marked 590 years since the Portuguese pioneered the navigation and exploration of the Gulf of Guinea. The Gulf of Guinea was branded with much erroneous views, such that people feared venturing into the area. But when in 1435 Gill Earnes sailed pass cape Bajador which was a point of no return, the Gulf of Guinea was opened to the outside world for exploitation. Since that time, the Portuguese were the supreme giant that traded in the area for over 200 years. They traded in slaves and agricultural produce before other European countries intervened in the area. Both the Europeans and the people of the Gulf of Guinea benefited from the Union but more on the European side.

Today, the security situation in the Gulf of Guinea remained worrisome due to the menace of illegal transactions by pirates and several cartels operating in the waters. Just like the British that set up the squadron that patrol the Gulf of Guinea when slave trade became illegal in 1807, countries bounding the Gulf of Guinea should set up similar security machinery together with the navy to weed out these illegal activities in the Gulf of Guinea.

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