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The Bolama Affair

A Nineteenth Century colonial dispute between Portugal and the UK

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Portuguese Guinea, now known as Guiné-Bissau is a small country on the west coast of Africa, north of the Equator, with a considerable number of islands and deep estuaries on its coast. Among these islands there is Bolama south of the capital Bissau.

At the end of the eighteenth century an adventurous English naval officer, Philip Beaver, attempted to establish a colony on the island of Bolama. The Portuguese considered this area for centuries a Portuguese possession. Nevertheless this venture had the support of the Prime Minister Pitt and the Secretary of State for the colonies Henry Dundas. To implement his plans Beaver incorporated a company and sailed with three ships – Calypso commanded by Dalrymple, Hankey, with Beaver in command and Beggins Benison. They arrived at Bolama in May 1792. There were 272 English colonists including women and children.

The fledgling settlement was immediately attacked by local natives – the bijagós – who killed five men and one women and made four women and a child prisoner. The rest fled to Calypso which sailed to Bissau already the main Portuguese settlement on the coast. Here Beaver was helped by the local merchant community including a José da Silva Cardoso – and land with his help, the English managed to ransom the captured colonists .

Beaver then attempted to buy the island of Bolama from the local chiefs for £ 78.16.08. The Chiefs accepted, and declared that they ceded the sovereignty of those islands "which sovereignty had been acquired by their ancestors by conquest and since then had always maintained without opposition". Hearing that other chiefs also considered themselves sovereigns of this area he paid them £ 25.13.01.

But it was not a success. Two months later most colonists abandoned Beaver and returned to England. The colony was reduced to 91 persons (16 had died of fevers, 8 killed by the bijagós and 14 gone to other parts of Guinea). Deaths continued and after 16 months Beaver left, defeated, to Sierra Leone from which he returned to England.

There were other later attempts. Joseph Scott in 1816 tried to create a new settlement but they were also massacred by the natives and took refuge in Sierra Leone. It must be said that the Portuguese during these attempts, always maintained that they had sovereign rights over the areas and earlier in 1752 the governor of Bissau, Francisco Roque Sotto Mayor, was instructed to take formal possession of the Island of Bissau and raise the Portuguese flag, which he did with no opposition of the local chiefs and population.

In 1827, the British governor of the West African possessions, Sir Neil Campbell, appeared on the scene and imposed what he described as "treaties" to the local chiefs. In these, it stated: "The sovereignty of the island of Bolama with the adjoining islands and the territory included in a line from Guinalda up to the sea to west-northwest is forever ceded to HM the King of Great Britain and Ireland" "The Treaties also made reference that the agreements entered into, in 1792, by Beaver were "recognized and confirmed".

When the Portuguese heard of this they called a meeting of all the relevant chiefs in 1828 and all of them swore they had not sold the island of Bolama to any foreign nation nor could they, as it belonged to the Kings of Portugal. They had indeed received presents from the English: "brandy, iron, gunpowder, hats, etc" as thank-you presents for allowing them to establish themselves on the island. All this took place at the start of the Liberal Wars in Portugal between the two brothers D. Pedro and D. Miguel. This meeting had taken place while D. Miguel was on the Portuguese throne. D. Miguel was defeated in 1834 and the Governor of Guinea, Honório Pereira Barreto (he was black!) as a precautionary measure, obtained their ratification in 1837, when D. Miguel's niece, D. Maria II (whose husband D. Fernando was the first cousin of Albert, the Prince Consort) reigned in Portugal.

After this, the local Portuguese governor had a fort built on the island with no opposition. He also created a settlement led by a local rich merchant, Caetano José Nosolini.

The British did not accept the situation. It must be said that all this takes place against a background of the combat against the traffic of slaves in which the Royal Navy was heavily involved and that the Portuguese authorities were accused (with some justification) of turning a blind eye to this commerce.

From 1839 to 1869 Britain often appeared uninvited in these waters. In 1838 Lieutenant Kellet commanding the brig Brisk captured the Portuguese ship, Aurelia Feliz accusing it of the traffic of slaves. She landed in Bolama, liberated 212 slaves belonging to Nosolini and others and took them to Sierra Leone, chopped down the mast where the Portuguese flag flew and left a notice stating that Bolama was British. He returned next year and did the same.

The Portuguese Government protested in London. Palmerston was foreign-minister. He first stated that the matter would be investigated but it was quickly concluded that the Aurelia Feliz was carrying no slaves, so its captain received damages. Also then Nosolini had, in law and under treaty and convention, every right to have slaves (what was forbidden was the traffic of slaves). Lieutenant Campbell writes to Commodore Wise in 1858: "I have visited several of the Bijouga islands, as also the Portuguese settlements on the islands of Bolama and Bissau, in the channel of that name. From my observations and inquiries, I am of opinion that there is no traffic of slaves carried out in the quarters by the Portuguese..."

In March 1842 a naval steam ship Pluto commanded by William Blount raided the island of Galinhas and a few days later the island of Bolama looting and killing. Diplomatic protests were made to no avail. In May, also of 1842, a Lieutenant Lapidge arrived commanding a brig "Pantaloon" and made a formal occupation stating by proclamation that the island having been abandoned by the Portuguese, he hereby took formal possession in the name of Queen Victoria. This formality was rather ridiculous because there was not a single Englishman on the island, and the British officer handed the Union Jack to a Portuguese soldier (belonging to the local tiny garrison) called Domingos Garcia with the recommendation that the flag should be flown wherever a ship appeared! Of course, the instructions was never carried out, and indeed the Portuguese soldier gave the British officer a wrong name – Lourenço de Moura – who was later described (by the British) with this name as being "the principal resident on the SW end of the island of Bolama".

Various diplomatic protests followed from the governor of Bissau, the Governor General of Cape-Verde and the central

government in Lisbon. London replied, somewhat disingenuously, that as Lord Palmerston's last note had remained unanswered for eleven months, Portugal had therefore recognized British sovereignty over the island of Bolama. Portugal's reply noted that Britain had not answered the documented historical claims made for seven years and that considering the time the orders took sent through the chain of command between London and the ships that had raided the island would mean that the British had not waited at all for seven months.

In January 1847 the British in a brig Rolls again disembarked armed sailors landed and took away the Portuguese flag. Later in the year there was a raid by the naval ship Dart.

The dispute dragged on. British naval ships tried to assert British authority in 1851 (Ranger, Commander Thomas Miller), 1853 (Fine-Fly, Commander G. Seymour), 1858 (Trident Commander F.A. Close) and in 1859 (again the Trident, this time bringing the governor of Sierra Leone) who appointed as governor, one David Lawrence, who was immediately denounced by the Portuguese governor Honório Barreto as being a slave trafficker and full of debts in Bissau. In 1860 the governor of Sierra Leone aboard the steam ship Prometheus again appeared, reaffirming British sovereignty. A grave incident however took place in this year, whereby the Governor Honório Barreto placed himself in front of the Portuguese flag with one sergeant and three soldiers. The British officer arrested the Governor considering him a prisoner-of-war. Barreto then demanded that if he was a prisoner-of-war he should be taken to Sierra Leone or wherever, but the Governor of Sierra Leone had him forcibly disembarked.

Considering this deteriorating situation the Portuguese Government through its Minister in London, Conde de Lavradio (1797-1870) proposed that the matter of the sovereignty of Bolama be resolved by arbitration and the British government could choose the Arbitrator. Britain refused and by an Order in Council incorporated Bolama in the colony of Sierra Leone (1861).

The local chiefs however again had submitted themselves to Portugal in a big and formal meeting (1856) stating that they had not understood the document which had been presented to them, as it was in English! The British having occupied Bolama now wanted to occupy Rio Grande where there were important Portuguese plantations. When the Governor of Cape Verde heard of this, he instructed the Governor of Guinea to face the threat. This he did with a force of 30 soldiers, 2 officers and 2 cannon. He took down the British flag and raised the Portuguese one. Britain, perhaps pressured by international opinion, now agreed to place the whole matter to international arbitration.

On January 13th, 1868 a protocol was signed in Lisbon between the Marquês de Sá da Bandeira, Portuguese minister of foreign affairs and the British envoy in Lisbon. The Arbitrator chosen was President Ulysses Grant, President of the United States of America (1822-1885).

It is important to refer that the arguments put forward by Portugal were basically historical ones. That is, what was described as the "priority of discovery". Only secondly the effective occupation by Portugal of the land, was invoked. This, as stated, is important as very soon after and in consequence of what became known as the "scramble for Africa", Portugal's historical arguments ("Portugal's archaeological arguments", as Lord Salisbury referred to them in Parliament") were replaced

by the doctrine of "effective occupation" as being the first argument for recognition of sovereignty. The Conference of Berlin in 1884 recognized this new principle which legitimized the King Leopold of the Belgians' and Germany's African ambitions.

The parties had six months to place their arguments before the Arbitrator. All things took place though the parties' Ministers in Washington.

President Grant found for Portugal on April 21st, 1870 accepting the historical arguments: "and it appearing that the said Island of Bulama (sic) and the said mainland opposite thereto where discovered by a Portuguese navigator in 1446: ..." and that "... that more of the acts done in support of the British title have not been acquiesced in by Portugal..." "...I, Ulysses S. Grant, President of the United States do award and decide that the claims of the Government of His Most Faithful Majesty the King of Portugal to the Island of Bulama on the Western Coast of Africa and to a certain portion of territory opposite to this island on the mainland, are proved and established". The Secretary of State, that is the U.S. Minister of Foreign Affairs, was Hamilton Fish.

The "advocate" appointed by the Portuguese Government, to argue its case, was António José de Ávila, Conde de Ávila (1806-1881) who later (1878) became, indeed, the "Duke of Ávila e Bolama". On the 1st of October 1870, Bolama was handed back to the Portuguese.