Resistance Culture: The Hallmark of Niger Delta Historical Experience.

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Abstract

The Niger Delta history from the 19th century has reflected a culture of resistance, as a result of economic interests between the people and their foreign and local quests of various epochs, who have been interested in exploiting the resources of the region. The study revealed that since the inception of the European imperialistic activities in the region, from slave to legitimate trades, through the colonial to post- colonial and the present petroleum expliotation dispensation, its people have been engaged in perpetual resistance as reaction against undue exploitation of its economic resources. This situation has severe consequences on the people and their environment, hence the enduring resistance culture from the eras of Jaja to Boro and Asari, among others. The study relied on secondary sources, using descriptive and quantitative historical method, and concludes that the resistance culture of the Niger Delta, which has been proved the study, can only stop when the brazen exploitations prevalent in the region abates as to enable the people have fair benefit of the resources which nature inhumed in their environment.

Keywords: Exploitation, Environment, Resources, Imperialism, Degradation and Militancy.

Introduction

The Niger Delta resistance struggle dates back to the era of the Atlantic commerce and lingered unfilit degenerate into armed struggle. Tekena Tamuno (1999:6) captures the long standing resistance culture of the Niger Delta people thus:

> *The big picture suggests that the problem of the Niger Delta lies in how to find sustainable solutions to sustained trauma; one lasting for centuries. The antecedents of the current predicament of the Niger Delta, lay in the era of gunboat diplomacy and protectorate treaties obtained through coercion or the threat of it - in the 1850s, 1880s and 1890s... British consular officials in the Niger Delta territories spoke, as it were, with tongues of fire; they did so through their gun boats and armed patrols and punitive expeditions, which brought death and depletion to lots of defenseless people. As these people were sucked more and more into vortex of colonial rule, they became increasingly conscious at their loss of fundamental human rights and a place in the sun with dignity. Their hatred of oppression increases while their quest for freedom gained momentum (expressed in different forms of resistance). They saw that colonialism in Nigeria emphasized externally induced master-servant relationships. Independence in their view, celebrated internally induced master-servant relationships. In either case, the people of Niger Delta saw themselves as victims; their God given rights and resources were denied them by one set of rulers after another.*

From this encompassing view, it is clear that the region has been a theatre of conflicts, in which the people have been engaged in resistance to free themselves from age-long oppression and exploitation, which have generated tensions and violent crises in the different epochs of its history.

In this paper, we shall examine the different epochs of Niger Delta resistance to establish the fact that the resistance struggles prevalent in the region over the years have been occasioned by the robust economic activities of the various epochs in which the regions people have been at the receiving ends, hence the resistance.

The Niger Delta: Definitions

The Niger Delta, as a result of its geographical features, antecedent economic activities, political events, and enduring controversies, has acquired dynamic definitions over the period of its history.

According to Shell Petroleum Development Company (SPDC) general view, the Niger Delta is the area of the Nigerian coastal plains built up and intersected by rivers flowing from the Niger-Benue system. The area is covered by several tributary rivers which have contracted over the past ten thousand years or so. It is a wetland of about 70,000 square kilometers. It spreads over a number of ecological zones: sandy coastal ridge barriers; blackish or saline mangroves; freshwater, permanent and seasonal swamp forests; and

lowland rainforests. Over the years, the rainforest area has been cultivated, leaving only the seasonal and permanent swamps as original vegetation. Subsistence farming and fishing are the main economic activities of the people (CEPTAE, 2002).

Cookey (1974), describes the Niger Delta as radiating southwards in a triangular shape, with its apex located approximately at the old trading town of Aba. Through the inumerable meandering tidal creeks, which interlace small rivers to the Orashi, Imo, Aba and Kwa Ibo, the Niger sluggishly enters itself into the Bight of Biatra. The terrain is low and muddy and at very high tides only a small proportion is dry. The air is constantly hot and humid; the dry season is short, while it has between 100 and 140 inches of rainfall annually during the long rainy season. The characteristic vegetation of this water environment is thick mangrove forest, which leaves the muddy banks of the creeks and extends about twenty miles inland. The delta is believed from scientific analysts to have been closing from palaes times (sixty five million years before present) that is from the time of the separation of South America from the African continent.

lsoun in an article titled 'Environmental challenge of the Niger Delta", aptly reflected the dynamic nature of the region when he defined Niger Delta in three perspectives, scientifically, historically and politically. According to Isoun, scientifically the "Niger Delta is that location associated with the lower Niger, especially, where the River split into two major tributaries: River Nun and the Escravos. It starts from the Benin Basin in the west, goes up to Aboh, in the North and then to Imo River".

Historically, he defines Niger Delta as the conglomerate of people who canvassed for special' attention that led to the inauguration of the Henry Willink's commission in 1957 that recommended the setting up of a board for the development of the Niger Delta in 1958. It includes the Ogoni province, Degema and the other colonial provinces of the Delta territories with harsh terrain. Politically, according to him, Niger Delta relates to the establishment of the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC), which made it synonymous with oil producing communities. This is a functional definition which assumed that all oil producing communities are part of the Niger Delta. While this political definition includes areas and groups that are outside the geographical core Niger Delta region, it serves as an instrument for addressing the common problem of neglect and underdevelopment of the oil producing areas of the Niger Delta and its environs.

Similarly, a non-government organization (NGO), the Niger Delta Environmental Survey (NDES:22), in its report gave cartographic, ethnographic and political definitions of the region. According to the report, the limits of the Niger Delta are:

- North, from Aboh
- West, from the Benin River estuary
- East, from the Imo River estuary
- South, to palm point below Akassa and Nun river estuary.
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Ethnographically, the report isolated a bewildering mix of ethnic groups of pre-crude oil and gas era, which comprised the communities of the Ijo (in Eastern, Western and central Niger Delta, the Ogoni, Itsekiri, Urhobo, Isoko, Ikwerre and Delta lgbo. It also includes several communities in the southern part of Ondo state.

Politically, the NDES report equally relates the Niger Delta to Federal Government parastatal, Oil Producing Areas Development Commission (OMPADEC). Before crude oil became the main source of Nigeria's revenue and foreign income earner and hence an issue in Nigerian politics, the Henry Willink's Commission described the Delta region of the southern minority zone as "poor, backward and neglected".

To Martyns-Yellowe (2003), the geo-ethnic element of the Niger Delta phenomenon came to the fore when it became obvious that the problem of the area was evidently totally misunderstood by the government and people of Nigeria in general. Resulting from this, there had been baseless hostility, antagonism and pessimism towards every call for attention to, and development of the area. This multi-dimensional definition of the Niger Delta underscores the multi-faceted nature, history and the phenomenal longstanding conflict situation of the region.

On the whole, our definitions relate the Niger Delta to a geographical entity in the lower Niger with dynamic boundary delineations. A region associated with age-long robust economic activities as a result of its natural endowments, especially petroleum. A region that has been associated with conflicts, crises and struggles occasioned by abiding clash of economic interest, from the period of Atlantic Commerce to date, between the region's people and their alleged exploiters; that is, the multi-national oil companies and the Nigerian State, leading to the heightened conflicts and militancy in the present oil dispensation.

The Resistance of the Eras of Atlantic Commence

The inception of the Atlantic commerce, beginning with the slave trade marked the beginning of exploitation of the resources and undermining of the interest and development of the people of the Niger Delta. The developments of this era equally marked the beginning of tensions and reactions arising from pains, tears and colossal

hemorrhage of its able manpower resources, generating great upheavals and conflicts that henceforth characterize the history of this region.

The inception and intensification of the slave trade in Niger delta was to engender disruption of the existing socio-economic processes of the communities and trading settlements and States. The methods employed in acquisition and sourcing of slaves among the Niger delta communities and their hinterland neighbours were socially nihilistic. The European slave dealers introduced violence with firearms and ammunitions into the communities involved in the trade. For instance in Bonny, their robust economic life was disrupted by the slave trade. According to Pichiccco Pereira Bonny had developed into a community of 2,000 dwellings which first dealers met as an already mobile commercially minded and outwaiting society, but became disorganized with the inception of the slave trade,(Fage 1978). The trade turned the community into slave raiding and fighting communities.

Isichei (1977) had described the slave acquisition process as destructive and barbaric.
Inkori asserts there is strong connection between firearms and slaves which shows strongly that slaves were acquired largely by military actions,raids, and kidnapping, all requiring the use of firearms.

The slave trade produced a class of African rulers and royal merchants who dominated and monopolized the trade machinery and wealth, at the expense of their societies. Ryder (1980) asserts that by the 18th century, it was extremely unusual for slaves to be procured other than purchased from established African rulers or from merchants who were themselves often operating under some kind of royal license or control. According to Jones (1963), the European traders needed in most States a supreme administrative head who had authority to negotiate with them the conditions under which they conduct their trade and the power to see that these conditions were adhered to by these communities. The condition were, of course, unfavorable terms of trade to the communities.

The Niger delta States, therefore, suffered tremendous commercial and other economic exploitation with attendant conflicts, as slaves were exchanged with cheap consumer and low value European goods.
The legitimate commerce which replaced the atlantic slave trade played its own part in the travails suffered by the Niger delta people and heightened the tensions and conflicts in the region in its dispensation. The successful exploration of the Niger and various expeditions expectedly greatly enhanced the hinterland trade. European trading companies who hitherto limited their operations to the coast were to move into the interior , to deal directly

with the hinterland people who produced most of the items bought by the Europeans. The coastal settlers were to gradually lose their middlemen position and monopoly of the hinterland oil trade. This precipitated resistance by the coastal people against the penetration of the hinterland by European trading companies operating in hinterland.

According to Jones (1963), the European traders needed in most States a supreme administrative head who had coastal middlemen who wanted to maintain their position and monopoly of the hinterland trade.

The big trading companies did not include several small firms and individual merchants pushing their way up to the Delta Rivers, into the hinterland and establishing trading posts at places like Akassa, Abo. Abragada, Odogeri,Utchi and Osamari, among others.

According to Dike (1956), the word 'tapping' was frequently used to describe the activities of the trading steamers, which passed above the Delta and intercepted the produce that used to pass through the hands of the middlemen. By 1876 "tapping' had become the regular feature of the Delta trade and, with it, British factories sprang up like mushrooms in the Delta oil markets, formerly a preserve of the middlemen.

The activities of the European merchant trading companies and the reactions of the Niger Delta people occasioned tension and conflicts in the region.

Alagoa (1995) described the British consul Hewells treaty-spree of 1884 which took him from the Camerouns to the Benin River. By these treaties, Tubman Goldie and his United African Company (new name for National African Company) excluded and frustrated other foreigners and African merchants in the oil market, and thus built up a monopoly for itself and the British merchants. The United African Company, backed by the British, extended its activities to areas hitherto subject to the Niger Delta powerful trading States of Opobo, Brass, Elem Kalabari, Bonny, Benin and ltshekiri.

Thus the determined effort of the British to control trade and subjugate the people of the Niger Delta with consular administration under the Niger Coast Protectorate brought much crises and resistance struggles involving the oil River monarchs. One after the other, these monarchs fell by naked treachery, gunboat diplomacy, and outright military expeditions in the face of British new imperialism.

The Resistance of Colonial Conquest

Colonialism was a feature of the new imperialism, in which European nations like Britain, France, Portugal, Germany and Italy engaged in competition for colonies in Africa. This brought about the phenomenon of the scramble for and partition of Africa.

In the Niger Delta, the British embarked on the conquest and subjugation of the trading city-states through the instrumentality of Goldie's Royal Niger Company and consuls. The conquest of Niger Delta States through unwholesome and brutish pattern of tricky treaties and gunboat diplomacy paved the way for the British imposition of colonial rule in the region during the high point of European scramble and partition of African territories.

The British encroachment into the Niger delta was corollary to the Berlin conference of 1884-1885 where it was decided that the European nations should undertake effective occupation in the African territories they were claiming. Isichei (1977) informs that to avoid being forestalled by another European nation, the British rushed and established a protectorate in the Niger delta after series of spurious treaties with most city-states. This was achieved through Goldie's Royal Niger Company, which was granted a charter in 1886 to govern vast areas of the Niger delta. With this mandate, the royal Niger Company with the connivance of the British Government consular agents embarked on initial mission of taking over the middle men position of Niger delta merchants and princes, as well as, trade exclusion of local and external trade rivals.

Niger Delta trade merchants and city-states were to suffer cruelty, brutality and outright conquest at the hands of Goldie and his Royal Niger Company officials and the Protectorate Consular authorities. In 1887, Jaja was abducted and exiled; in 1894 Nana was overthrown after fiercely defending his capital of Ebrohimi; in 1895 Nembe was subdued and in 1897 the British destroyed the ancient kingdom of Benin; looting its incomparable art treasures.

In the central Niger, the little known but famous Bebeke-oladubakemefa of Igbedi community suffered torture and execution at the hands of the British authority for disturbing British trade interest. According to Alagoa's (1995) account, the famous Bebeke-ola, a big trade and big time fisherman, was drawn into violence in a bid to protect himself and his people from internal colonization by his neighbors in course of the 19th century delta trade. With time Bebeke-ola became branded a terrorist because his activities disturbed British trade interest. Alagoa records that in a swift reaction, the British colonial authorities, who were eager to stem the tide of any activity that threatened the smooth and

peaceful conduct of their trade in Niger delta, summarily executed Bekebe-ola as a pirate on the 3rd of September 1903. The trading empire was thus destroyed.

One after the other, the entire Niger delta city-states and communities fell to the superior fire powers and brute force of the British. In the resistance and confrontations that ensued, the British had the upper hand as a result of their more sophisticated weapons compared to the limited and crude war implements of the natives.

The delta State and hinterland communities were brought under colonial rule largely through military operations. The consequence of conquest of the Niger delta was the loss of sovereignty, which became the lot of the chiefs and their subjects.

The British and its Agents used tricky and spurious treaties and gunboat diplomacy to subdue the once powerful and dynamic Delta States and communities. These communities and city-states were brought on their knees in the face of the ravaging European new imperialism, which subjected the whole of what later became known as Nigeria under British colonial rule.

Resistance of Colonial Rule and Policies

The British after the conquest and subjugation, of the entire region of Niger Delta, formulated and entrenched a colonial economy that was designed to serve the economic interests of their country. Galloway (1975:102) rightly observes that "the principal motive of the British authorities in Nigeria was not to advance the interest of the various peoples of the area, but to serve British economic interest".

The colonial economic policies and the administrative structure were therefore designed to realize the economic objectives of colonialism, which is maximal exploitation of human and material resources of the subject people.

Tamuno(1978:246) has noted that "the thrust of British colonial administrative and economic interest are to the affect that matter relating to administration and economics are inextricably intentioned in a typical setting".

In keeping with British policy, the British colonial government embarked on the provision of infrastructural facilities that would facilitate the exploitation of raw materials of her subject people.

Onimode (1984) notes that the policy of constructing infrastructural facilities was for the purpose of advancing imperialistic trade and transfer of economic surplus from the

colonies which was pursued relentlessly by the British colonist economic interest, disarticulated the indigenous socio-economic processes in Nigeria. One remarkable feature of British colonial feature in West Africa was the use of free and compulsory labour in her dependencies which the colonial administration enacted laws to legalize. The Southern Nigerian proclamation no 15 of 1913 empowered the British administration to enforce compulsory labour for various purposes (NAE intelligent Report). Ofonagoro (1979) notes that apart from clearing creeks for military operations considered indispensable for the suppression and subjugation of colonial peoples forced labor was used for maintaining existing physical infrastructure in the hinterland.

The policy of forced labor elicited various forms of resistance from the subjected communities of Niger Delta people. Afigbo (1972), notes that the use of forced labour for road, making and building government stations and quarters; the use of conscripted carriers as a means of transportation for more than two decades and a half, were things which helped to create the wide feeling of aggression that predisposed people to rise in resistance against the obnoxious polices of the British. A good example was the death of Mr Crewe-Read, a district commissioner of Agbor who was notorious for his insistence on the use of force labour. He was known for flogging native chiefs who faulted in free and unpaid recruitment of forced labour. He was killed at Owa by indigenes who were protesting against the brutality of the British colonial administration.

The introduction of British economic policy of monetization and taxation in the Niger Delta had serious impact on the economic of the region. The economic policies were adopted to effectively exploit the resources of the colonized people through the integration of the colonized people into the international economic and financial systems where the colonizing power is strongly linked. According to Ake, (1981:28) "the monetization of a precapitalist economy is necessary for its integration into a capitalist one". Ake further observes that the process of monetization and the modalities set up to make the process was to lay the foundation for the proletarianisation of the African peasantry.

In order to meet social and economic needs and obligations to themselves and the colonial administration, the people were forced to sell their labour or cultivate cash crops to earn money as to pay their tax in British currency. This situation turned most of the rural population in the Niger Delta into cash crop producers or salary workers in government or British cash produce factories.

The imposition of tax on the Niger Delta people elicited violent reactions, in some cases against the colonial government in form of riots. Afigbo (1972) records that in Opobo town

there was estimated thirty one wounded during the eruption of the Aba Riots of 1929, which had bandwagon effect in most Niger Delta Communities.

This study confirms that the British colonial policies in the Niger delta disrupted and disarticulated the traditional and pre-colonial thriving economies of the city states and communities and ignited various forms of resistance. British tax policies and monetization of the economy in British currency forced the people abandon their existing economic activities to go into seeking British employment and engage in peasant production (in cash crops) as to pay children school fees and other transactions which do British pounds sterling.

The Niger Delta Oil and Resistance against Marginalization

The importance of oil and its role as the mainstay of the Nigeria's economy underlie the political development of minority consciousness of the Niger Delta people whose fear of marginalization became accentuated. This is as a result of the negative impact of oil exploitation and the underdevelopment of the region vis-à-vis the political weakness of the people in a Nigerian state with overbearing majority tribes.

The situation has engendered the Oil and Gas politics of the Nigerian policy by which Niger Delta quest for self-determination and resistance became aggravated.

After the coup de'etat of 15th 1966, a young police officer, and undergraduate of university of Nigeria, Nsuka, Isaac Jasper Boro, in apprehension of possible hijacking of the regions oil potentials, proclaimed his revolutionary vision of the Niger Delta with two friends and other youths numbering 150. Boro with his army under the name of the Niger Delta Volunteers Service (NDVS) in February 10, 1966, declared the Niger Delta Republic, and went into conflict with Nigeria Federal troops, who defeated them in the 12 day resistance effort.

Adaka Boro's revolution movement was the first pointer to the frustration of the Niger Delta Youths, who were angered by Decree No.5 of 1969, that put "the ownership and control of all petroleum in, under, or upon land, up to 200miles limit of Nigeria" under the federal government. This degree strengthens the dispossessions and marginalization of the people over the benefits of their oil. This eventually engendered the enduring resistance of the petroleum era in the Niger Delta.

The agitation for a fair share of oil revenue accruable to the Niger Delta Region went on in different dimensions. Prominent among the agitations were, Ogoni bill of Rights

sponsored by Ken Saro-Wiwa and the Movement for Survival of Ogoni people (MOSOP), Umuchem uprising in Etche, Egbema Youths Association agitation against Nigeria Agip oil company (NDCL) , Egi Youth Association uprising, among others.

The activities of Ken Saro Wiwa and MOSOP and the concomitant events in Ogoni land later turned violent, inevitably resulting in a recurrent face-off between the youths and law enforcement agencies. In the end, nine Ogoni citizens, including their spokesman, saro-wiwa, lost their lives to extra-judicial devices of the military under General Sani Abacha then Head of State, to repress the growing agitations of the oil-bearing communities of the Niger Delta.

The effects of the operations of the oil companies on the environment are not only devastating but have triggered off series of crises. As rightly noted by Oloruntimehin and Ayoade, (2002):

> *Most of the conflicts (in the Niger Delta) have arisen from complex environment problem and a long history of basic neglect and social development of peoples who have seemed helpless , watching their land and water resources continually devastated by intensive exploitation for petroleum and gases, without deriving any appreciable benefits by the way of investment in their own development.*

Most of the militant leaders claim that they took up arms against the oil companies in order to protect their environment from further destruction.

Our study reveals that the practice of pseudo-federation strengthened by dispossesional laws has elicited the clamor for resource control, emanating from the alleged undue marginalization, exploitation and underdevelopment of the region. This has also lead to the heightened restiveness which degenerated into armed struggle and threatening the corporate existence of the Nigerian State.

The emancipation of the Niger delta (MEND) claims that the injustice is fighting is the rape of the Niger delta for decades, using constitutional means to develop other regions of the country; and that the criminals are the Nigerian Government, oil majors, corrupt politicians and the officers and men of the armed forces, who are involved in oil bunkering. A national event which fired the violent disposition of the Niger Delta youths was the Abacha one million youth match in Abuja, where the youth of Niger Delta saw the splendor of Abuja built with Niger Delta money. The youths were to return home to violent struggles for the development of their land, demanding resource control.

The aftermath of the two million match event sparked off the violent conflicts that engulfed the entire Niger delta, degenerating into armed struggle by various militia groups that sprung up in the various oil bearing communities. In Bayelsa State, the direct result was the Kaiama Declaration by ijaw youths on December 11, 1988. By this declaration, a deadline of December 30, 1988 was given to all multinational companies to cease operations and vacate the entire Niger Delta. An estimated 5000, ijaw Ethnic youths gathered at Kaiama, Bayelsa state, where the declaration was made, leading to the inauguration of the infamous Egbesu cult.

From this point, the oil bearing communities in the Niger Delta caught the virus.
Their resistance and violent activities were reflected in the statement of Cynthia White (2006:6) captures the resolve and objectives of the militia groups:

> *We have made it clear that despotic forces of the occupation of Nigeria and its imperial collaborators should vacate the Niger Delta and they would not listen. Let us make it clear to them once, we shall bleed you to your marrows and you shall beg to leave our father land. We shall continue to unleash acts of sabotage against agents and infrastructures of the Nigerian state and its collaborators until they vacate our lands.*

Thus in this spirit, the militia groups intensified terror and aggravation against the oil multinational companies and the Nigerian security agencies, through destruction of oil pipelines, rigs, ocean oil drilling platforms, piracy and all agents of government found in the creeks and land areas of the Niger Delta.

This was the resistance situation in the Niger Delta before the Amnesty program instituted by late President Musa Shehu Yaradua douced the violence resistance in to the region.

Conclusion

From the foregoing, it is clear that the Niger Delta Region has witnessed different forms of exploitation and marginalization in its history, spanning from the eras of the Atlantic commerce through colonial and post-colonial epochs to the present post-colonial dispensation of petroleum exploitation.

These epochs where the people experienced these forms of exploitations and marginalization, the people were not docile, but resisted in different forms, culminating in militancy and armed struggle before the Amnesty, which brought the current uneasy calm.

There seems to exist some level of calm in the region, however, most of the factors that save rise to the resistance culture in the region are still persisting.

While risking to be tagged prophets of doom, it is our considered opinion that if a permanent solution is not found, Nigeria might yet experience a new form of resistance from the region.

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