

Oil Exploitation and the Accentuation of Intergroup Conflicts in the Niger Delta, Nigeria

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KEYWORDS Crude Oil. Crises. Development. Communities. Economy

ABSTRACT The paper examines the view that oil exploration and production in the Niger Delta, Nigeria has strained intra and intergroup relations in the oil bearing enclave of the area. It seeks to evaluate how the oil industry-induced conflicts in the region have impeded the sustainable development of the area. The study makes use of both primary and secondary sources of information and data to analyze the issues in contention. The findings of the study showed that the discovery of crude oil and its consequent exploitation has radically altered the hitherto pattern of intergroup relations in the Niger Delta. Relationship is now characterized by violence, communal crises and the emerging economy of conflict. The author suggests the need to nip in the bud this disturbing development by creating jobs for the idle hands in the region. The government should as a matter of priority, integrate the people of the region into the mainstream of the petroleum industry. The study concludes that the people of the region should be re-orientated from feeling that the only means to earn money is to threaten oil operators. More importantly is the need to enact new law on property rights in the region which will take care of the interest of the people of the oil producing communities. This is so because if the people of the region are part owners of the oil industry, the feeling of alienation would be ameliorated and this could also reduce the spate of sabotage of oil installations in the area.

INTRODUCTION

Petroleum production in the Nigerian context has produced a combustible politics of intergroup relations marked by violence. Yet it would be difficult to exaggerate the role of oil in the Nigerian economy. Since 1974, oil has annually produced over 90 percent of Nigeria's export revenue. In 2000 Nigeria received 99.6 percent of her income from oil making it the world's most oil-dependent country (Ross 2003). Oil production has also had a profound effect on the Nigeria domestic sector.

One way to characterize the impact of oil is by looking at the rents derived from oil. Since 1974, these rents have constituted between 21 and 48 percent of Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Remarkably, these rents have failed to raise living standards and done little to reduce poverty (ANEJ 2004). Oil exploitation has also led to social and political unrests in the oil bearing enclave of the Niger Delta. Understandably, the struggle by ethnic minorities of the Niger Delta for resource control and management as well as autonomy has been characterized by new trends. These emergent trends are reflected in the increased outbreak of violent inter communal, inter ethnic and intra communal conflicts (Obi and Okwechime 2004). Oil, it must be said has radically 'altered and crudely subverted the moral eco-

nomy' of affection that sustained the communities of the region leading to the emergence of a new marginal pattern of association subsisting at the fringes of socio-economic opportunism (Ukeje 2001).

How then do we explain this emergent trend of communal violence that has characterized intergroup relations in the Niger Delta? In this paper, attempt would be made to explore how oil exploitation has engendered a mind set within the various communities in the oil belt of the Niger Delta to the extent that they are willing to engage in 'Mutually Assured Destruction' (MAD). Conventional studies of the oil industry in the Niger Delta have approached issues from ethnographic perspectives without paying due attention to the historical antecedence of the crises in the region. My analysis charts the relationship between violence and economy of conflict by examining the nature of intergroup relations in the area before the discovery of oil. Rather than see the people in the oil belt as naughty by nature, we seek to trace how convivial relationship overtime, snapped to give room for the present spate of communal violence.

THE NIGER DELTA: A SYNOPSIS

The Niger delta region is situated in the Southern part of Nigeria and bordered to the south

by the Atlantic Ocean and to the east by Cameroon. It occupies a surface area of about 112,110 square kilometers. It represents about 12 percent of Nigeria's total surface area. The area is a treasure trove of bio-diversity in spite of the fact that most of the forest have been degraded due largely to oil exploitation (Bassey 2008). According to the 1991 Census, the total population of the Niger Delta region was about 20 million or about 23 percent of Nigeria's total population. The Niger Delta is the third largest wetlands in the world after Mississippi and Pantanal. The region is noted for its peculiar and difficult terrain. The region comprises of nine states. It has forty different ethnic groups, speaking 250 dialects, spread across 5,000 communities. Notable among the diverse ethnic groups are the Ijaws, Ogonis, Ikweres, Itseliris, Urhobos and Isokos. The heritage of the people is replicated in the modes of dressing, marriages, traditional culture and festivals (Federal Republic of Nigeria 2003). Farming and fishing are key livelihood activities for people of the region. The point to note is that, the region is the heart of Nigeria's oil production. Some two million barrels of oil are extracted from the Niger Delta daily. The Niger Delta is sitting on top of about 176 trillion cubic feet of gas and about 35.2 billion barrels of oil reserves. Over 90 percent of the national revenue comes from the sale of oil produced from the Niger Delta. The environmental degradation associated with the industry and lack of equity in the distribution of oil wealth have been some of the key issues aggravating interethnic conflicts in the region as would be shown shortly.

INTERGROUP CONFLICTS IN THE NIGER DELTA BEFORE THE OIL ARMADA

As linguistics evidence, migration stories and traditions of origin suggest, the people of the Niger Delta have long interacted with one another. Trade was the most important factor that linked many communities together. No community was self-sufficient in the production of agricultural and manufactured goods required either for necessity or luxury. Differences in physical environment and geographical factors tended to promote trade contacts and hence intergroup relations. Trade routes, markets and traders contributed to interactions among the different groups, thus further promoting intergroup relations.

The fact that the Niger Delta swamp did not allow for intensive agricultural production led the Niger Delta dwellers to engage in trade with their hinterland neighbours. The products of the Niger Delta such as fish, crayfish, salt and earthenware were exchanged for the agricultural product of the hinterland such as yam and palm oil. Alagoa (1970) has shown that there was a great deal of trade across the delta. Captain Adams noted this fact towards the end of the 18th century when he wrote, 'much trade is carried on here with the natives of Bonny and New Calabar, who arrive in their canoes for that purpose' (Captain Adams 1823). It should be noted that salt was a major item of trade between the delta coastal region and the hinterland (Ikime 1980). Trade routes linked the whole of the Niger Delta. There are numerous waterways and roads. By their nature, rivers run through different communities and the links they provided helped to promote intergroup relations. The roads were more important than the waterways because they connected more towns and villages than the waterways.

Trade was not, however, the only unifying factor. The various people of the region were also integrated by religious, political, and social institutions. These institutions included age grades and secret societies, oracle practice and marriage ties. In some cases, age grades were coordinated in a way that many villages were involved, and the loyalty among members could be as strong as the loyalty among people of the same lineage. This was also applicable to secret societies. There was rift however. Farming settlements sometimes fought over farmland, just as they sometimes collaborated to jointly exploit farmland. Fishing communities and hunters disputed access to waterways and fishing grounds as well as forest (Isumonah and Gaskia 2001). The search for better fishing grounds and salt making deposits and the struggle for the control of territorial rights accounted for much of the disputes. These disputes in some instances resulted in major wars as diplomatic approach to conflict resolution broke down. It must be stressed that warfare and diplomacy were dynamic elements in Niger Delta intergroup relations (Ejituwu 1992). Nevertheless, the people engaged more on limited warfare.

Due to the predominantly fish and salt monoculture of the people of the Niger Delta, a symbiotic short and long distance trade developed between the delta and the hinterland.

This geographical arrangement also created conditions for war and peace. Traders had to traverse long distance to well known markets and fares and the death of a member of a trading group often attracted revenge from the community from which the victim had come (Ejituwu 1992).

This pattern of intergroup relation changed markedly with the advent of the European traders from the 15th Century into the Niger Delta. By virtue of European presence, the region was transformed into the centre of African trade. The overseas trade encouraged raids and wars leading to the continuous exodus of people as slaves from the delta and its hinterland to the New World (Dike 1956). It should be added that, the aforementioned sources of conflict in the Niger Delta before the era of the European trade were enlarged or modified by the European presence after 1500.

Quarrels over fishing grounds remained, just as the problem of the control of trade routes persists. However, the presence of the Europeans and the introduction of the slave trade and later palm oil trade intensified the scale of these quarrels. For instance, European traders demanded slaves, not salt and fish, which the people produced; and for slaves they gave them rum, guns and other instrument of violence to induce them to raid, capture and sell slaves to them (Anene 1967). At first, the middlemen raided their immediate environment, but when many of the communities in the area had been depopulated or put to flight, they went a field into the immediate hinterland to satisfy the demand of the European traders.

Colonial rule had a decisive impact on intergroup relations because the colonial enterprise often exaggerated, froze and then sterilized the nature of the existing relations. The nature of the treaties signed with the different groups as well as the different ways through which the groups became colonial subjects came to play a significant role in pitching this or that group against another. Various scholars have drawn attention to the artificial nature of Native Courts, Districts, Divisions and Provinces into which the British divided Nigeria for the purpose of effective administration. These, as they were, led to the elimination of separate identity for the people.

Colonial rule was something of a paradox. On the one hand, it brought people together in a new grouping and for new purpose; on the other, it emphasized already existing differences and introduced new ones (Ikime 1985). Besides, the

challenge of living in urban centres with their cosmopolitan population led to the emergence of town, clan and ethnic unions where urban dwellers were able to find much needed identity. What is significant is that unlike now that oil is preponderant, interethnic tension during the colonial period was less fierce. However, the competition for a place in the colonial state and the attendant bad blood would seem to have spilled over to post colonial Niger Delta.

The post colonial relation amongst the group in the Niger Delta does not look promising as hostility is entrenched among the groups. Conflict is a natural phenomenon. Wherever people get together in the family, village, and city or in a nation, situation of conflict arises, leading to struggles of various levels of intensity. These may result in violent combat which could lead to the destruction of the group. However, the various groups have not always combated one another as demonstrated earlier; they cooperated in the course of the anti-colonial struggles.

OIL EXPLOITATION AND THE CHANGING PATTERN OF INTERGROUP CONFLICTS IN THE NIGER DELTA

In 1956, oil was first discovered in commercial quantity by the Anglo-Dutch group, Shell D'Arcy in Oloibiri, in what is now Bayelsa State (Schatzl 1969). In 1958, Nigeria became an oil exporting country. At its current peak production, Nigeria export about 2.5 million barrels of crude oil per day (Ikein 1990; Frynas 1998; Okwudili 2005). The struggle by ethnic minorities of the Niger Delta for resource control and autonomy has been characterized by new trends. What to note however is that the history of the struggle for autonomy and property rights dates back to the pre-colonial period. The successive institutionalization of revenue sharing formula and power distribution along regional lines tended to reinforce the politicization of the common wealth derived from the exploitation of oil. By virtue of this, even within the oil producing communities of the Niger Delta, there emerged a new trend in intergroup relations as reflected in the increased outbreak of violent inter-ethnic and communal conflicts across the Niger Delta. Such conflicts have raged between neighbouring towns, communities or villages, involving the use of firearms, often resulting in heavy loss of lives and properties (Obi and Okwechime 2004).

These conflicts happen in the face of growing poverty and misery occasioned by reduced oil revenue, the erosion of welfare services and opportunities normally provided by the State. This is also occasioned by pollution as a result of intensified exploitation of the Niger Delta environment in quest for oil by oil companies. All these conspire to provoke inter-ethnic rivalry. Inter-elite rivalry also taps into ethnic competition. Each aggrieved group mobilizes support which under the volatile conditions of the Niger Delta almost inevitably results in violent conflict.

Oil exploration and exploitation have also intensified bitter and bloody conflicts between emerging interest groups within and between communities. Such conflicts now rage between elite groups, competing claimants of traditional chieftaincy stools, youth organization on one hand, and between them and community leaders, on the other; between the urban residents, and even village and emergent professional community-company go-between (Eteng 1998). The emergence of disparate groups with conflicting claims to oil revenue and compensation in the Niger Delta attests to the fact that, the potential benefits from the oil economy to community leaderships and groups whether solicited or compelled are quite enormous and would seem to be a major element in the struggle and restiveness in the region (Ikelegbe 2005).

Most of these conflicts are struggles over ownership of fishing ponds, land, village boundaries, shrines and oily swamps. These disputes also entail the struggle over compensation paid by oil companies, involving oil communities or peoples that have co-habited for decades. The competition for these resources assumes a more destructive dimension because what is being competed for is too meager for the competing population in the competition (Collier and Hoffner 1998; Albert 2001). It must be noted that these conflicts have survivalist, historical, political and economic undertones (Obi and Okwechime 2004). Land, it must be noted was a causal factor in pre-colonial and colonial intergroup conflicts in the Nigeria Delta. Indeed, a cursory survey of the colonial records will show in bold relief that land disputes were among the more common problems that the colonial state encountered (Boer 2001). The dynamism that land disputes have attained in present day Niger Delta is as a result of the content of the land, and not the land itself.

Indeed, the conflict that took place between the Kalabari and Bille in the late 2000 and early 2001 in the Cawthorne channel were caused by a dispute between the two communities over who had the right to claim ownership of the land where the two Shell flow stations are situated (Human Rights Watch 2002). At the heart of the dispute was the contesting claim to the same piece of land, as a result of an attempt by each community to lay claim to the payment of royalties by Shell for these and other Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) facilities passing through the area.

The Arogbo Ijaw/Ugbo Ilaje crisis followed the same pattern of dispute over land ownership. The Ijaw claimed that they were the aborigines of the Niger Delta and that the Ilaje migrated from Ile-Ife (Davies and Hammed 2001). In a way the exploitation of oil radically subverted the moral economy of affection and convivial relationship between the groups of people that have lived harmoniously for centuries. Without the discovery of oil in this region, it would have been unlikely that the two communities would be talking and antagonizing each other on purported ancestry, autochthonous existence and longevity of wave of migration.

A major trend in intergroup relations is that even in intra-community relations there is strain and stress. Conflicts arise often in struggle for oil. This involves members of a clan, village or ethnic group with some form of communal identity. Some examples will suffice here. In Ogbogoro community in Rivers State, violent intra community conflict broke out over the distribution of compensation money when two rival leaders, lock horns to contest the legitimate chief to share the money. This led to the destruction of lives and properties (Ojo 2002; United Nations Development Programme 2006). The point must be made that ordinarily before the oil armada the process of ascension of Chieftaincy is sufficiently familiar. Nevertheless, due largely to the fact that the position confers economic power on the holder; it has become a do or die affair as unorthodox means are now employed to assume leadership.

The case of Nembe is even more intriguing as it resulted in the so-called Nembe war. The crisis started as a result of an agreement Shell negotiated with the Chiefs of Nembe on compensation, contracts and job opportunities (United Nations Development Programme 2006). It was alleged that the Chiefs kept a disproportionate share of such

benefits and appropriated most of the money to themselves, while most contracts were awarded to their companies and cronies. What is evident from these examples is that contemporary intra community conflicts arise because of the struggle over the sharing of benefits from oil. This pattern of quest for the little crumb from petroleum business must have been escalated by the nature of the oil industry. As it were, oil production crowd out manufacturing and agricultural sectors, because the industry is not pro-poor. Typically the oil industry employs few skilled and unskilled workers. Manufacturing and agriculture, by contrast, are more pro-poor since they tend to produce more low skilled jobs than the petroleum industry (Ravallion and Dart 1996; Bourguignon and Morrison 1998).

It must be noted that a new twist has been added to inter-communal conflicts in the region. For one, it must be conceded that these types of conflicts are not new in the Niger Delta though the incidences have increased since the commercial exploitation of oil. Particularly since the 1990s, the conflicts have worsened intergroup relations. One thing that is obvious in the emerging inter-communal conflicts is the fact that until now, some of the cases would have been settled amicably without resorting to violence. A possible explanation for this is the fact that societal mores have broken down and instrument of social control embedded in traditional societies have been eroded.

It would appear that these conflicts are transferred aggression deriving from want, pent up frustration and deprivation in the midst of plenty. The Oleh and Olomoro imbroglio in Delta State should drive home the flavour of our contention. The conflict was caused by disagreement in the sharing formula of waste pipes that needed to be replaced by Shell. The Oleh people were aggrieved at the quantum of pipes given to Olomoro. A slight disagreement that ensued snowballed into a conflagration with its attendant loss of lives and properties. But for the intervention of the Mobile Police Force, the Oleh and Olomoro communities would have eliminated themselves as a result of a trivial issue as exhumed waste pipes (United Nations Development Programme 2006). The point to note is that the aggressive reaction of the Olomoro people to the issue in contention may not be unconnected with the fact the community seems to hold the short end of the stick as Oleh is seen to enjoy

government and oil industry patronage. In other words, the exhumed pipe saga was used as the catalyst to express their dissatisfaction with the system of distribution of amenities by the government and oil industry. Thus, the crisis bordered more on social justice and equity in the allocation of scarce resources by the government and the oil industry.

Intergroup relations in contemporary Niger Delta are also underlined by inter-ethnic conflicts. These conflicts are lethal and have drawn attention to the fragile nature of peace in the region. The disenchantment in the region over the operation of federalism in Nigeria particularly in the area of revenue and power allocation has bred a vicious cycle of interethnic conflicts. This type of conflict has been linked to frustration. Thus, angry at themselves and everybody, the communities often turn against one another and unnecessary low intensity war of attrition rage on in different parts of the Niger Delta. It would appear that inter-ethnic conflicts are generally acknowledged in the Niger Delta largely because they usually involve a bigger area and a greater loss of lives and properties. Some of these incidences include the Ijaw/Itsekiri, Urhobo/Itsekiri, Ogoni/Okrika and Ilaje/Ijaw conflicts (Human Rights Watch 1999).

The point to note is that, not all the conflicts are related to oil exploration. Some of them are historical in origin while others are as a result of unilateral government decisions as typified by the Ijaw/Itsekiri crisis in Warri, in Delta State. Indeed, right from the pre-colonial period, the Ijaw and the Itsekiri have had a strained relationship which is not unconnected with the contest for the ownership of Warri, an oil bearing enclave. What to add is that due to the strained relationships between and among the various ethnic groups in the Niger Delta, warlords and patrons of crime merely disguised their pure economic agenda, with political grievances in order to legitimize their activities.

The point of departure is that while the various interethnic conflicts simmered, criminal minded individuals capitalized on the situation to engage in illegal bunkering of crude oil. After all, the Nigerian case merely buttresses the fact that nations that depend on oil may be prone to crisis (Turshen 2002). But, it should be emphasized that there is no innateness of natural resources that compel conflict (Reno 2003). Rather, it is obvious that 'it is the hegemonic struggles

between super-ordinate and subordinated groups and the nature of management and appropriation of resources that engender conflicts' (Ikelegbe 2005).

CONSEQUENCES OF INTERGROUP CONFLICTS IN THE NIGER DELTA

The economic and social costs of the conflict in the Niger Delta are enormous, both directly and in terms of lost opportunities. Inter and intra group conflicts which in most cases, have been bloody and have in some instances, led to military intervention have serious implication for everyday life in the region. They have direct impact in terms of human, financial and economic sacrifices for the people of the region. The most obvious public concern is the disruption of oil exploration and production and the attendant *force majeure*, which drags down the economy and leads to the loss of foreign exchange sorely needed to finance national development.

For the oil companies, the costs are quite high. These include: the loss of revenue due to illegal bunkering, contractor claims for breaches of contract, high cost of providing security for staff and equipment and large sum of money paid out in form of Public Relations for potential trouble makers. The obstruction of Shell activities and seizure of equipment resulted in a loss of 1,530 project days in 2001. Oil production deferments arising from community disturbances and sabotage was 45 million barrels in 2000 and 35 million barrels in 2001 (Ikelegbe 2005). Inter ethnic conflicts and hostilities with the state led to a loss of about 40 percent of total oil production of 2.2m barrels per day in mid 2003. Aside from these, violence hurts individuals and communities by endangering their livelihoods (Aghalino 2006). In a way, the unhealthy relationship among the people of the region discourages investment in the region that could bring the much needed jobs for the people.

One other fall out from the violent intergroup relations is the emergence of ethnic militias (United Nations Development Programme 2006). The phenomenon of ethnic militias has attained a disturbing trend in the region. The most popular of these groups are the Niger Delta Peoples Volunteer Force (NDPVF) led by Alhaji Mujahideen Asari Dokubo, the Martyr Brigade and the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND). In addition to these groups,

there are well over one hundred smaller armed groups, locally known as 'cults' with names such as the Icelanders, Greenlanders, KKK, Germans, Mafia Lords and Vultures' (Kalejaiye and Akinsola 2007).

While the issue of ethnic militia is not entirely new in the region as attested to by the activities of Isaac Adaka Boro (Kaemi 1982; Oyerinde 1998), over time, this has taken a dangerous dimension as evident by the wave of hostage taking. As it is, the groups have unleashed terror on people in the Niger Delta and disrupted the exploitation of oil in the region. Close to one thousand persons lost their lives annually in the bloody encounters of militias in the Niger Delta. Our point of departure is that in virtually every part of the Niger Delta there is the preponderance of ethnic militias whose swansong is settlement of differences through violent means and this has strained intergroup relations in the region.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In this paper, we have made attempt to discuss the changing patterns of intergroup relations as a result of oil exploration and production in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. We observed that the discovery of crude oil and its consequent exploitation has radically altered the pattern of intergroup relations in the Niger Delta. Relationships are now characterized by violence, communal crises and the emerging economy of conflict.

It is therefore suggested that there is the need to nip in the bud this disturbing development by creating jobs for the idle hands in the region. The government should as a matter of priority, integrate the people of the region into the mainstream of the petroleum industry. The study concludes that the people of the region should be re-orientated from feeling that the only means to earn money is to threaten oil operators. More importantly is the need to enact a new law on property rights in the region which will take care of the interest of the people of the oil producing communities. This is so because if the people of the region are part owners of the oil industry, the feeling of alienation would be ameliorated and this could also reduce the spate of sabotage of oil installations in the area.

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