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The Wolf and the Bloodied Knife: The Self –Destructive Quest for Survival in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria

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Abstract- This work examines the circumstance within the Niger Delta, tracing the origins of the crises which currently engulfs the region. Its causes and acknowledging the injustice meted out to the region. It also shows how the activities of groups and individuals have further exacerbated the conditions of its inhabitants as some of the activities being engaged in make it almost impossible to come out of the quagmire or particular note is the effect of oil bunkering, vandalization and kidnapping on the region which has led to a seeming state of anomie. As to the way forward the issue of education, enabling laws such as the Freedom of information, bill and a straightening of the electoral system are advocated as measure to bring us out of the “conflict”-woods” we have found ourselves, preparing us for a time when we do not have to depend solely on oil.

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It is said that in the thick of winter (has there ever been summer!) in the arctic region when the means of sustenance and survival have greatly reduced because of the weather condition, that desperation is usually at its peak. The fastest way to die then is to go out alone or stop for a rest in the snow. Any seeming sign of tiredness is likely to encourage an attack from wolves which are known to trail hikers or drifters for hours.

Dwellers in that region are known to carry sharpened knives when they must go out for long outing and in the event of tiredness, with wolves behind them, they cut themselves with a knife and place it in the snow with its extremely sharp and bloodied and exposed.

Drawn by the scent and sight of blood, the wolf (or wolves) move to lick the blood and end up cutting their tongue on the knife drawing blood, which they continue licking, not knowing it is theirs, while human makes good his/her escape. (ANONYMOUS)

I. INTRODUCTION

The Niger Delta stretches through the Southern part of present and Nigeria and it is the third largest in Africa, ninth in the world. It is estimated to be about 70,000sq kilometres, surrounded by much water and vegetation, the peoples of the Niger Delta are predominantly fishermen and farmers, who have lived in this area for well over nine centuries. What is of interest is the escalating levels of conflict and violence among people who have lived together with minimal conflict?

The question is why has the Niger Delta suddenly become a veritable ground for lack of security, ethnic clashes and anti-government tendencies?

It would seem interesting to note that less than a decade ago, most areas in the Niger Delta were regarded as being among the most peaceful in Nigeria, but today, conflicts seem to be due order of the day and the Nigerian state is either too confused or unconcerned, inept at taking any adequate action that might mediate these conflicts, and through its actions and inaction, worsening the situation in the Niger Delta area. The conflicts as seen in the Niger Delta today, are either being directed at the government, otherwise, they are inter- or intra- communal in nature. When it is the latter, government only sets up probe panels whose reports never see the light of day, but if it is against the government or its sources of economic revenue the reprisals that follow are usually very severe.

The reasons that have been adduced for these conflicts are as many as they are varied, however, the common thread that runs through them all is “the ecological devastation of the area as a result of reckless oil and gas exploration activities by trans-national corporations in league with Nigeria Federal dictatorship”. An example is the 1990 Umuechem protest in which a whole village was razed and over eighty people murdered by Nigerian security force at the behest of an oil producing company Conflict in the Niger Delta have since stepped up due to the seeming resolve of the indigenes of this area to either bring the Nigeria government to accept its responsibilities by making adequate provisions for the people of the area or ensuring that further degradation of the land and exploitation of gas and oil reserves which account for 90%-95% of the Nigerian total revenue –cases on a permanent basis until the people of the Niger Delta are in control of whatever happens in their territory, as exemplified by various militia groups that operate(d) in the region, notable among them, is the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND).

Thus, marginalization, real and perceived –as seen in the rapid development of Lagos State and Abuja, the Federal Capital Territory and the abject poverty and deprivation in the Niger Delta that, as it were, produces the golden egg are believed to be the reasons for the acts of violence. The questions to ask

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are then: why are those who own but do not control these resources are left with nothing? What are the processes that have made this possible? Why has it continued unabated? Is it just due to deliberate negligence of the government of Nigeria or is it because class pressure have made it impossible for the government to undertake any meaningful development plan or action in the Niger Delta?

These question are central when one notes that Government (whether at Federal, State or Local government level) has over the years crated agencies, boards and parastatals whose responsibility were to provide ameliorative action for the effects of the ecological denigration and also pursue programmes which would make for the development of the Niger delta. Such agencies are those like the Niger Delta Development Authority (N.D.D.A). Niger Delta Basin Authority (N.D.B.A), Ompadec, PTF, Niger Delta Environment Survey (NDES) and the Niger Delta Development Commission Grand as these programmes may seem, government always ends up shooting itself in the foot through lack of funding imposition of corrupt officials on such boards, grafting and outright scrapping of these agencies.

Why does government set up these agencies with the knowledge that it will ne scrapped in no distant time? To act as a face-saving measure? To act as a means of quelling agitation? Or simply a way of postponing the inevitable? Different scholars have sought and proffered various solutions to these question and more.

Our problematic in this work is to show that though injustice has been perceived and seen on the part of the Federal Government and its association (Oil prospecting and exploiting firms), the approach chosen by some frontline actors from the region has been such that in their quest to bring attention to their plight, more damage has been foisted on the region, knowingly or unknowingly. And the nature of this damage is fundamental, running deep and wide, felt more by the people of the region than others. This view is strongly supported by P.C Wilmot (1978:38) who states that “the native who has been pushed to the wall begins to think of himself almost solely in terms of his capacity for violence. The objects of violence, however, tend to be other native caught up in the same dehumanizing process.

In terms of social and inter-ethnic tolerance, the peoples of Niger Delta were mostly peaceful except for the periodic Kalabari-Nembe, Kalabari-Bonny conflicts over trading posts. In the western delta, the Itsekiri-Urhobo tensions had to do mainly with the status and role of traditional authorities. The discovery of oil only further exacerbated these conflicts and though it is not as if inter-ethnic conflicts never existed, but the rates have shot up with oil-exploratory services and a fight for

economic survival between different groups, and against the government.

With regards to wealth and economic resources, the Niger Delta produces some 90% of Nigeria’s total economic revenue and has a third of the sixty billion barrels of the continent’s proven reserves. Within it are located three refineries, two petrochemical plants, one liquefied natural gas and two liquefied petroleum gas plants, a fertilizer plant, a major steel plant and three gas-fired electric power generating station. Also, within it are numerous revenue generating businesses and concerns. The forests of the Niger Delta provide all types of important sources of food and income to the local communities. The mangroves have over seventy major uses; non-timber forest products collected from the mangrove forests include medicines, dye, thatching, and food species as diverse as monkeys or periwinkles. In the freshwater swamp forests, raffia palm, mangroves and ogbono. Land snails and other products are all significant. So why has the quest for survival become so intense?

The answer is not far –fetched. The activities of multi-national corporations have so devastated the natural environment that sustenance is not coming from thence, and the vast oil wealth being produced does not impact on the people because of the “joint-efforts” of Government, MNCs faulty & hastily concocted policies (such as the Land-use decree, Petroleum Act and recently, the Petroleum Industry Bill) and corrupt politicians. Meanwhile, the over twelve million people consisting of several ethnic groups and communities who live in the region bear the brunt of the social and environmental impact of the coastal erosion, flooding, sea level rise, fishing and forest resources loss, oil and non –oil pollution, industrial effluent discharge, emissions, gas flaring, domestic waste disposal, water contamination, over –exploitation and threat of extinction through incessant military adventures in the area.

II. CAUSES OF THE NIGER DELTA CRISES

The problems of the Niger Delta are myriad and would tire out an Amazon if an attempt were made to recount them but they can easily be traced to a combination of the following:

- a) The class character of the Nigerian State
- b) Disarticulated mono-product based economy
- c) External /Foreign influence

III. THE CLASS CHARACTER OF THE NIGERIAN STATE

The character of the Nigerian state since its inception in colonial times, has been that of a class nature. It was a state, which was mainly “a coercive force unable to transform power into authority, domination into hegemony. This is the legacy of the colonial state which made no pretence of being anything

more than an organized force used determinedly to effect colonization and to prevent resistance to it “ (Ake 1994). The colonial State and its agents remained a symbol of superior force, an agent of terror, inspiring though its exemplary acts of violence, fear and awe rather than veneration and respect, but for how long can the state continue its reign of terror, not forever, which is why it has to transform factual power relations into relations of right, duties and obligations. Moreso, because instability of factual power relations can be seen in its always being challenged when one or more of the dominated feel an excess of strength of resentment of rage.

With increasing clamour for independence, the British initial a process of decolonization, which altered the patterns of participation and influence in public affairs. The character of the colonial state did not change much at independence because the colonial state was inherited rather than transformed “ power was effectively devolved to the bourgeoisie who commanded the skills and resources necessary to determine public policy at the regional and national levels (Williams, 1976)” but like the colonizers before them, most of the nationalist leaders regarded the state as the instrument of their will. They ‘privatized’ and exploited it for economic gain and used it oppressively to absolutize their power. The transition from the colonial to the independent state thus required and led to changes in class relations (from foreign to domestic ruling class and between the comprador bourgeoisie and the peasants or rural dweller) and generated contradiction that could not be resolved within the framework of representative political institution.

It is necessary to note that at this point that, “classes as entities, do not enter into conflict only elements of it do, though it is the case that large parts of contending classes are on rare occasions directly drawn into battle. For the most part, however, the conflict is fought out between groups of people who are part of a given class and possibly, though not certainly, representative of it” (Draper, 1978) in the Nigerian state, the dominant class refer to all “those who are in the power position to take what they can from the nation’s accumulated wealth either directly or through any form of patronage and are also in the position to decide what others will get” (Anikpo, 1996). We thus find a small elite who become rich and are prepared to tolerate (as in the case of Niger Delta, the inconveniences of oil company activities like environmental pollution) inequalities for the sake of continued financial benefit, and are increasingly resentful of their exclusion resulting in protests and fightings.

The Nigeria state has over time, because of its class nature relied heavily on government intimidation and abuse of human rights, leading to the partial displacement of the state by informal groups that elicit a sense of common purpose, and relegate the relevance

of the state to being a power resources and a fearsome nuisance. In the Nigerian case, the contradictions and conflicts led to the invitation of the military into governance, citing reasons such as , the military can act as a corrective force, a modernization agency. The truth of the matter however is that individual ambition and the fact that military is part of the ruling class led to the occurrence of military rule.

The Military which was at first “colonial” was led by a corps of professional officers who constituted the major instrument of power for the “establishment” and it was political in that, while being a tool used for the preservation of the status quo, it was not itself an independent source of power or policy. However, with its invitation into governance, it transformed into a putsch military characterized by highly politicized officers, leading to a familiar pattern of military dictatorship, either of the unstable junta form or the stabler, one-man form, which Gen. Sani Abacha almost attained.

The assumption of state power by military commanders and top civil servant did not eliminate the politics of resources allocation. It simply changed its form. Military administrators, Civilian and Military commissioners now controlled access to opportunities; at both Federal and State levels, a clique of insiders allocated resources. In Nigeria’s fifty years of existence, the military class and their cohorts have ruled for over twenty-eight years; and the military state noted for its command structure and lack of a democratic culture was particularly brutal.

With the return of civilian rule, the likes of General Obasanjo and Mr. Abubakar Atiku attempted to outshine others with their privatization programme which ended up turning common weal to private property; and their quarrel over the little known Petroleum Trust Development Fund (PTDF) presented in clear relief the class nature of the Nigerian State and its “minders”. The incessant raises in fuel pump price and attempted extension of tenure and sale of the refineries, in the dying days of his administration are other pointers of the exploitative class character of the Nigeria State.

IV. DISARTICULATED MONO-PRODUCT BASED ECONOMY

Another cause of the problem in the Niger Delta is that, over the years, Nigeria has not been able to come to terms with its economy. The economy suffers from a serious lack of forward and backward linkages, which would have allowed industries to service themselves and play complimentary roles to one another. For example, virtually every economic activity it touched upon by what happens in the oil industry and yet there are hardly any successful attempts at diversifying the economy and so we see a situation where after ONLY groundnut, it became ONLY coca,



ONLY palm oil and finally ONLY crude oil. Even the petroleum sector does not service itself, much more other sectors. Gas is flared endlessly, polluting the environment and yet the turbines of the National power company suffer from a lack of gas to power the turbines and produce electricity, which is vital if the manufacturing sector will thrive.

In the Rivers State, for example, the “School –to- Land” programme which was meant to provide jobs through agriculture was initially a huge success with the yields obtained from the farms, but the programme failed and along with it a mammoth crowd of people were thrown into the labour market, because there were no linkages. Mountains of corn cobs were thrown on the street constituting a health challenge due to the fact that there were no strong facilities and also because no conversion industries which could produce by-products from the raw crop like corn syrup, biscuits, corn flour, corn flakes, etc were available.

The narrow focus on one product or area makes it all but possible to meet the needs of the region, much more the country, because one sector alone does not have the capacity to absorb all the citizens in suitable employment. The same narrow focus on oil revenue has led to what is referred to as “the Dutch diseases” which has the effect of breeding corruption and the abandonment of essential issues as tax collection, which if it occurs, the collectors are usually the beneficiaries. This does not portend well for any nation.

V. EXTERNAL /FOREIGN INFLUENCES

The role played by external influences which are interested in this crises cannot be underplayed because while some (like the trans-national oil companies) generated the conflict through activities such as environmental pollution and degradation (NDES report, 1997:249 notes that “*between 1976 and 1996, a total of 4835 incidents of oil spillage has occurred with approximately 2,446,322, barrels of oil spilled on the land, swamps and offshore environments of the Niger Delta*” and worse incidents of spills have occurred since), inducing government officials to take actions and decisions inimical to the well being of the host communities, sponsoring State terrorism (when the people of Umuechem demanded provision of basic social amenities and compensation for oil pollution of water supplies, which also affected crops by conducting peaceful protests at the premises of Shell. In response, Shell divisional Manager (East), Mr. J.R Udofia wrote to the police commissioner on October 29, 1990, requesting a detachment of armed mobile policemen for “security Protection” from the “impending attack” by youths; and between October 30th and 31st, over eighty people had been killed with the mobile police force unit “destroying or badly damaging 495 houses” (the price

of Oil, 1999:123), others like arms dealers have seen in the region a source of wealth and are actively pushing in arms (the thirty –three(33) containers loaded with RPGs and other weapons from India intercepted by the security agencies in the last week of October 2010 is a cases point)

Foreign oil merchants also traverse the terrain seeking for those who will assist in oil –theft or bunkering, as it is popularly called, willing to do anything at any cost to lift crude oil for sale, albeit illegally.

The above reasons have all culminated in the crises occurring in the Niger Delta presently, but what are the self destructive tendencies arising from them?

VI. EXPRESSIONS OF SELF-DESTRUCTION

While it is no longer deniable that the problems of the Niger Delta were caused by the above stated reasons, the animosities in the region seem to be inflamed by disregard and careless statements like that by a certain Philip Asiodu, a former secretary of petroleum as to what he thought about the demands of the minority ethnic groups. Hear Him. “The people are so small, they will never threaten the welfare, the economic welfare of Nigeria or its stability”. In response, different groups have tried to assert themselves in order to come out of the poverty and deprivation which stalks the inhabitants, particularly in the rural areas. For example, the leader of NDPVF is known to have insisted that “the oil belongs to us” when asked why his group was engaged in bunkering.

The recourse to oil bunkering has left many communities without a source of livelihood or drinking water as youth engage in the vandalization of oil pipelines to access crude for sale as a means of the sustenance. Not having the requisite technology, spills have been the order of the day, leading to further degradation of an already battered environment. Apart from the sale of crude, person have been known to engage in local distillation of crude to produce petrol and diesel for sale. This has led to the deaths of numberless youth arising from health complication of inhaling escaping gases or when explosions occur because of the pervasive presence of combustible gases.

In the period prior to the granting of amnesty, innumerable young men and women died because of gang wars over tuffs, areas of influence and control of oil extraction spots, with security agencies left bewildered and overpowered when they were not in complicity. While they may be viewed as miscreants, channelled properly, these are supposed to be part of the productive work force of the region and nation. When the young, strong and healthy die off, what hopes do we have for the region in terms of its ability to develop or its quest for survival.

Another area in which the quest for survival has proved inimical, is the issue of kidnapping for ransom, which began as an effort to attract attention to the plight of the region. Today, a lot of companies have pulled out of the region because of the heightened insecurity and the effect has been greater unemployment and poverty as those who were previously employed have been thrown into the labour market when their companies relocate to safer climes.

A yet more fundamental tendency is the diversion of the youth from education activities as ends-means disparities are on the increase. Role models are now political thugs or those who cannot account for their source of wealth. In some communities, children as young as eleven and twelve, in a bid to fend for themselves, prefer to roll drums and gallons to discharge and loading points than to go to school and the importance of education cannot be over-emphasized in the quest for development and survival. Without education, such communities, and by implication the region, are simply brushed aside in an ever-globalizing world which demands an understanding of universal trend attainable only with qualitative formal education. Circumstances have arisen where after cries of marginalization, indigenes are asked to send in candidates for employment in companies and the only position that can be filled are those of messengers and cleaners because they do not have those with necessary qualification to obtain the most basic clerical posts

With the above, we begin to see how the “wolf” licks its own blood, chasing shadows while forgetting the substance it ought to have gone after. Any lack of a clear cut, well thought-out feasible plan will continue to negate the search for development and survival in the Niger Delta region, because it would be the case of someone shooting himself in the foot.

VII. THE WAY FORWARD

One reason why the social sciences are viewed as not being a science is because of its social nature. Human action can hardly be straight-jacketed in particular moulds at all times and this is because an individual might not act in the same way another time given the same circumstances. In the same vein, solutions to social problems are usually not water-tight. What is proffered here are possible solutions, which should work, all things being equal (but what have things ever been equal?)

a) Education

There is a need for government, at all levels to engage in the provision of meaningful, qualitative and accessible purpose driven education to the all segment of the populace. Providing education creates the enabling environment for loosening the mind from the grip

of ignorance and manipulation, making it possible for the human potential to be realized.

b) Electoral system

Present day Nigeria is bedevilled by the issue of politicians and office holders who do not lay allegiance to the people because they were not voted into office. The present system of voting without choosing or selection rather than election makes it impossible for the electorate to hold their leaders accountable and it also prevents them from actual participation in the decision-taking processes that border on their well being. A case in point is the Freedom of Information bill that the national assembly has refused to pass because it creates room for monitoring the spending patterns of office holders and this is one way by which the populace, whether of the Niger Delta or elsewhere, can assert themselves and have a voice in what affects them.

It is usually the attempts to muzzle the people that leads to agitations and in some cases violent protests, as Fidel Castro was once believed to have said. “Those that make peaceful change impossible, make violent change inevitable” I have noted elsewhere (Badey, 2007) that there is an urgent need to expand the social and political space such that even if the strong have their way, the weak will not be prevented from having their say.

c) Viable laws and policies

Another possible way by which the crises in the Niger Delta can be doused is the formulation and execution of viable laws and policies which have been thought-through and are contextualized. Hiding under the cloak of ‘universal best practices’ will our cultural, traditional and socio-economic cum political milieu will only lead to further confusion. Issues like the Global Memorandum of Understanding (GMOU) which the oil companies have tried to foist on host communities would do nobody any good.

Our laws must be proactive and targeted at doing the best for the most. Why, for example, would SPDC and other oil companies still be flaring gas and the Federal Government keep granting them extensions knowing the impact of such gas flares? Why should inanimate pipeline have the Right of Way (ROW) and uproot communities that have settled on native adequate relocation plans or compensation?

Government must remember that laws are made for the good of the people and not the other way round. The United States government prevailed on SHELL to stop the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico which is far removed from the immediate shores of the country but our government would prefer to label every spill as sabotage. Other laws such as the land use decree, petroleum Act and the Petroleum Industry Bill must either be abrogated or reviewed in line with present realities.

The current Amnesty programme must also be carried out in line with the recommendations of the Niger Delta Technical Committee set up by the government to ease the tensions which are a result of the belief that government, in its usual manner, is attempting to short-change the people of the region, especially with the reports of the starvation of NDDC of funds.

With the above, there is a strong belief that the Niger Delta with or without oil, would be a place that will exemplify true development.

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