

Niger Delta and Powerless Politics

Nsirim – Worlu, Heoma Gladys

Department Of Sociology, Faculty of Social Sciences, University Of Port Harcourt, Port Harcourt – Nigeria

Corresponding Author: Nsirim – Worlu

ABSTRACT: This work was set out to investigate how the Niger Delta and its people are involved in powerless politics in Nigeria. In the process we described the Niger Delta and its people and further contextualised powerless politics. This work proposed that the more a people engage in powerless politics, the more the region is underdeveloped. With that we went to the field to find out whether the elites are engaged in powerless politics and so, some three hundred persons were purposively interviewed and more than 75% of the respondents answered in the affirmative. The respondents agreed that the Niger Delta people as minority in the nation always form alliances with other majority ethnic groups which may be the Igbo in the east, Yoruba in the west and Hausa in the north; and the outcome of the alliance turns out to be marginalisation, oppression and deprivation. The major ethnic nations whose people occupied high political positions used their privileged offices to make decrees and laws which disadvantaged the Niger Delta and its people. The Niger Delta people are not homogenous in nature, therefore, successive Federal Governments of Nigeria, be it Military or democratic harp into that and continue to ensure that the region does not have a common front to demand for the determination of the control of the natural resources abundant in the bowel of their environment and the outcome is continued suffering, deprivation and underdevelopment of the people and the region contrary to the practice when Nigeria was administered under regions in the past and not states.

Keywords: Niger Delta, Elites, Powerless, Politics and South-South.

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I. NIGER DELTA AND POWERLESS POLITICS

Nigeria has six geo-political zones and Niger Delta is one of them. The Niger Delta is situate at the Southern part of the nation with a population of about ten million, nine hundred and eighty seven thousand, one hundred and forty nine according to 2006 Census figure; a figure we think has increased in the last ten years. It is bound in the East by Akwa Ibom and Cross River States; West by Edo and Ondo States; North by Imo and Abia States and South by the Bight of Benin and Gulf of Guinea. The Niger Delta people and its environment are considered as endangered species by Rivers Chiefs and People (1992); supported by Nsirim- Worlu (2005).

Since the discovery of oil in commercial quantity in Oloibiri in the present day Bayelsa in 1956 and subsequent massive discovery and oil production activities in other parts of the region till date, this region is a true symbol of neglect and abjection. This then raises a pertinent question on the mind and lips of many all over the world. The question is, are there no people of repute from this region. Without hesitation, the response is to the contrary, which is, there are. If there are, why this is blessed region and its people pauperised as observed by some scholars; for instance, Nnanen (nd); www.geoexpro.com; and www.jorind.

In an attempt to answer the above question, this researcher proposes that the more a people engage in powerless politics, the more the region is under developed. If politics is hereby accepted as that science whose interest is in how resources are shared amongst those concerned, therefore, this work is set out to assist those interested in what Niger Delta people are experiencing in Nigeria to understand the role of the elites from the region in relation to the larger Nigerian nation.

The concern for the state and nature of development of the Niger Delta and its people have prompted many works and this particular one posits that different write ups and researches that are related to oil production activities have been done by scholars; examples are , “the Niger Delta and Politics by Ekpo (2004); the political economy of Mexican oil industry: some implications for the management and utilization of Nigerian petroleum industry, Onyige (2001); the petroleum industry and the environmental impact in Nigeria, Aina and Adedipe (1996); Social Impact of Oil Industry Activities on the Environment and Health of Niger Delta Region, Nsirim- Worlu (2005); just to mention a few. Niger Delta of Nigeria has aroused development scholars’ interest profoundly in that, this region though agreed by many to be richly endowed abundantly with both natural and human resources is seen to be developing at a snail pace.

The elites from this region belong to the stratum of the nation's elites and the political elites are those that determine who gets what, where, how and why in either democratic or military era. This is a known fact in any society and this is also operational in Nigeria and this is why this work is set to find out why it is observed that the Niger Deltans engage in powerless politics in spite of the rich natural resources that are found in the bowel of the earth and water in the region. This is why the broad objective of this work is to investigate why the development of Niger Delta region is not encouraging in spite of existence of the political class or elite and abundance resources.

II. CONCEPTS AND CONTEXTUAL BACKGROUND

This section is set aside to briefly describe and situate the major concepts as they are relevant to this work.

NIGER DELTA REGION OF NIGERIA

Nigeria is one of the nation states that make up Africa and it is composed of fifty four countries on the whole. Nigeria is located in the Western part of the continent and it shares boundaries directly with Cameroun in the East, Benin Republic in the West, Niger and Chad in the North and Atlantic Ocean in the South. Nigeria is described by some writers in www.treasurytoday.com/2014/10 as the giant of Africa. Some of the reasons proffered for that description being the role she played in the dismantling of apartheid in South Africa and her demographic strength.

In the view of Tamuno and Felix (2006); Nigeria is divided into six geo-political zones and the Niger Delta is one of its significant other. The Niger Delta by the stance of this work is composed of three states and they are; Bayelsa, Delta and Rivers States. These three states are those which form a triangle at the base of the Nigerian map and their environment is directly impacted upon by the effect of the Atlantic Ocean. To corroborate this description is World Bank Report (1996), which posits that "the Niger Delta is considered to be within Rivers (Bayelsa included) and Delta States; each covering about 1.7million hectares or in total 3.5million hectares (approximately the size of Belgium)". The Niger Delta in the widest sense therefore, comprises an area of 2.5million hectares, which include; mangroves, fresh water swamps and surrounding areas.

To further describe the Niger Delta region are the contributions of Oguara (1996) and DEENETS (1995) in Nsirim-Worlu, (2005); which state that the "Niger Delta can be divided into four main ecological areas; coastal and ridge barrier islands at the mouth of the Delta; mangroves, fresh water swamps, forest and lowland rain forests; and the boundaries between these areas are hard to differentiate because, they depend on seasonal river flows and flooding which affect eighty percent of the area. On the other hand, the Niger Delta is divided into five ecological zones, which include the Niger Delta Atlantic Continental Shelf (marine). The continental shelf is that where all the offshore oil wells are located. According to Royal Dutch/ Shell, the Niger Delta comprises a network of swamps and creeks covering some 112,000 square kilometers, depending on how you count, or almost the size of England; and it estimates it is home to about 12million people.

From the varied descriptions, we quite agree with a statement in www.nasa.nigerdelta.org which argues that there is no consensus on a definite definition of the actual area of the Niger Delta, which is because, of the person(s) in question and their various experiences also. The differences in description of the Niger Delta by different scholars notwithstanding, you can agree that the region is actually a delicate and fragile ecological zone with abundant natural resources of importance to the entire world.

At this juncture, let us briefly describe the people of the Niger Delta. The Niger Delta has both riverine and upland sections; the riverine people are those whose sources of livelihood are dependent on the actions of the Ocean, Rivers and Rivulets on the environment. This group of people engages mainly in fishing and other products from the water, which are not limited to oysters, periwinkles, ogbono, canes and many more.

The upland people are those whose activities for sustenance are majorly agrarian. Agrarian in that, they produce goods like yam, plantain, cassava, garri, cocoyam and different types of bush meat as they also engage in hunting for games (animals).

The two groups have lived harmoniously and engage in economic and social activities, such as exchange of goods and services, intergroup marriages way back into history till date. The multiplicity of ethnic groups and dialects that abound in Nigeria, the Niger Delta region has its own fair share.

This goes to say that there are many different ethnic nations and languages in this area, some understand themselves, while others do not; the autochthonous characteristics of the people notwithstanding, the people had co-existed peacefully till recent events that are unfolding that have tried to create dichotomy amongst them; this is not within the purview of this work.

The population of Niger Delta according to 2006 census can be considered as ten million, nine hundred and eighty seven thousand, and one hundred and forty nine. These people are regarded as Niger Delta people; however, each group has its independent political leadership according to their different customs and traditions. This goes to state they have no centralised political administration and so it is till date. This is observed to be a source of major challenge to their corporate existence in modern day Nigeria.

The Niger Delta people also carry out several forms of bodily adornments and environmental ornaments. For instance, edeali (indigenous tattoo) and nekalari (coral beads) are worn copiously during marriages, child dedication, burials and notable annual festivals, like wrestling and new yam festivals. They also decorated the walls of their homes and compounds with afara (ceramics) and shell of sea foods, and such decorations beautified their surroundings.

In the past, the Riverine Niger Deltans built more of make- shift houses; this was solely dependent on the tidal effect of the rivers on the land. This pattern of building has changed tremendously with improvement in science and technology. While the upland group built more permanent structures as the effect of water on their land is always not as drastic as that of their neighbours.

III. POWERLESS POLITICS

Powerlessness is a concept that is derived from the word power; power according to Weber in Giddens (2006) is “the chance of a man or a number of men to realise their own will in a command action even against the resistance of others who are participating in the action”. That is, getting your own way, even when others do not want you to. The opposite of power then, is powerless but let us here attempt to explain the word powerlessness. Powerlessness is the inability of a people to determine what they can get from their nation’s wealth and how they can get it. This inability to get what belongs to a group manifests in what Hale (1990); Haralambos and Holborn (2000) and Giddens (2006), refer to as powerlessness.

Next is the view of Marx in Hale (1990), which states that “people who control essential resources exploit those who lack such resources. Inequality, injustice, and the resulting conflict, competition, aggression and war, are as much features of society as is peaceful co-operation. To the extent that there are shared values and expectation in an equal society, consensus is likely to be manipulated rather than freely adopted”. The foregoing comment leads us to another important word in this work, which is politics.

Politics therefore, concerns itself with “the means whereby power is used to affect the scope and content of governmental activities, Giddens (2006). Douse and Hughes in Haralambos and Holborn (2006); posit that politics is about “power” and so, “any social relationship that involves power differential is political”. To Nsirim-Worlu (2016); “politics is the act of using instrument of office to determine who gets what, how and when from available scarce resources”.

In the perspective of this paper, the Niger Delta people are observed to be involved in powerless politics in Nigeria from the moment of its creation till date. Nigeria is the creation of the British colonialists and who divided Nigeria into three regions for administrative convenience; that is, Eastern, Western and Northern regions.

Each of the regions had within it an identified major ethnic and complimentary minority ethnic groups. This kind of arrangement empowered and legitimised the right of the recognised major ethnic groups in each region to dominate and control whatever resources that were the major means of livelihood in the region.

The identified and recognised major ethnic groups are the Igbo in the East, Yoruba in the West and Hausa/Fulani in the North. In 1965, the regions were increased to four because the Midwestern state was carved out of the Western region. This prominence accorded to the major ethnic groups directly granted them the polemics/feeling of supremacy and this translated into who occupied what political or administrative positions in the nation, especially politically. This observed arrangement is in line with a view in Fundamentals of Marxist – Leninist Philosophy (1985), which states that “the countries of tropical Africa display strong evidence of the influence of tribal aristocracy on political processes”. This kind of arrangement we think contributes to the type of politics along either ethnic or religious line prevalent in Nigeria and it does not make for the development of the nation as a whole, as there has been continued dissatisfaction between what is considered as the major and minor ethnic nations within a region.

In the fifties and up to 1966, each region was administered by regional leaders known as Premiers , for instance, Sir Ahmadu Bello for the Northern Region; Samuel Akintola, Western; Michael Okpara, Eastern; and Dennis Osadebay, Mid Western; and the natural resources predominant in each of the regions were harnessed and proceeds used to develop each region. For instance, palm oil was the major cash crop or source of wealth in the Eastern region and it was from the proceeds of the palm oil that University of Nigeria, Nsukka was established and sustained. University of Ibadan also had its establishment and sustenance from the proceeds accruing from coca grown and produced in the West. Finally, the establishment of cities like Zaria and Kano and Ahmadu Bello University had its impetus from the cotton and groundnut proceeds. The foregone account shows that each region harnessed and utilised the natural resources for the development of its people and region.

In the face of Nigeria – Biafra civil crisis, political tension, intimidation of minority groups by the three major ones and the quest for peace and stability, Retired General Yakubu Gowon then a Lieutenant Colonel created twelve states out of the existing four regions by 1967. This singular action of General Gowon contributed greatly to the continued existence of Nigeria till date; as some minority ethnic groups were carved out of their oppressive and dominant ethnic groups in the East, West and North.

It is notable to mention that the creation of states did not translate to peace and stability as it were; rather it increased to the maximum the struggle for the control of natural resources in the region by the states in what is tagged as “resource control” Ekpo, (2004) and www.jorind.com. The creation of states empowered the Federal Government of Nigeria (FGN) to be absolutely in charge of the resources available in all the regions. Furthermore, successive governments (military and civilian) promulgated some decrees and laws which enabled her to control the states resources centrally; for instance, the Land Use Act and Decree of 1968 and 1978 respectively.

The centralising of the national resources and promulgation of some decrees and laws further subjugated the Niger Delta people and region, and this translates to underdevelopment, incessant conflict (intra and inter), environmental degradation and the associated challenges. The foregoing picture forces the Niger Delta elites always to form alliances with some majority ethnic nations during formation of political parties in any democratic era.

The observed marriage of convenience is aimed to assist the minority regions of which Niger Delta is one to have support as to determine how its resources could be harnessed and distributed; an effort that any observer can state has not achieved its purpose. Formation of the mentioned alliance(s) has contributed to the division and powerlessness of the people and region. Very current and memorable are the challenges former President Goodluck Ebele Jonathan suffered in the hands of Nigerian populace, especially the major ethnic nations.

The Niger Delta people are not homogenous in nature, as it has both riverine and upland group whose major means of livelihood are also not the same. Again, the alliance has alienated them completely from their means of sustenance as the laws and decrees of the FGN cannot allow them to utilise their God given resources uninterrupted and the activities of International Oil Corporations (IOCs) have greatly devastated and degraded their environment.

This alienation of the people and their devastated environment made the elites from the region to form themselves into several groups whose activities are to struggle for the wellbeing of generality of the people in the region. Within the different ethnic nations that make up the region, there have emerged militarised groups also. They are the arm carrying and trigger trotting youths who are known by several names and as the days go by more and more groups emerge. Many will consider these groups as activists or advocacy groups, but the activities of some have meted due stress and suffering for the people and environment; for example, the Niger Delta Avengers (NDAs) whose profile shows that they are only focused on blowing up pipe lines carrying crude.

Some of the groups existing in the region are popular, while some are not. Notable among them are the Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP). MOSOP became notable under the leadership of late Ken Saro – Wiwa; an environmentalist and writer. His activities attracted the attention of the world to the degradation and devastation that were on going in Ogoni land. His activism pitched him against the Federal Government of Nigeria and the International Oil Companies operating in the region. The outcome of this antagonistic relationship is that he Ken and eight of his kinsmen paid the supreme price of death by hanging on November 15, 1995; on the order of the then Military government led by late General Sanni Abacha, GCON; Nnanen (n.d).

The execution of Ken Saro-Wiwa and his kinsmen by the FGN was intended to cow the people of the region but, the reverse was the case as many more ethnic nations became more restless, vocal and militarised youth groups emerged. Examples include and not limited to Ijaw Elders’ Forum (IEF), Ijaw Youth Council (IYC), Chiefs and Elders of Ikwere, Ishekiri and Urhobo; Ikwere Youth Movement (IYM), Egbesu, Movement for the Emancipation of Niger Delta (MEND), Niger Delta Volunteer Force (NDVF), Niger Delta Avenger (NDAs) and more.

It is observed that the different ethnic nations’ groups have central to their agitation control of the natural resources that are abundant in the bowel of the earth and water in the region, as was the practice in Nigeria in the fifties up until the mid sixties when the colonial and early indigenous administrations ruled the nation in regions before 1967 when General Gowon (rtd) created states. The idea behind the demand or struggle for the control of the natural resources regionally though germane, but the sentiment among the political class had continued to be a bane to achieving their target as the people are divided along ethnic line. This kind of dialectics has placed the Federal Government in an advantaged position as she had maintained status quo that is, continued control of the region’s resources at the centre and has also used state might to ensure that the International Oil Companies and military operations are not disrupted by the people of the region. This posture of big brother maintained by the FGN accounts for the slow development of the region, as evidenced by degraded environment and underdevelopment, militarisation of the region’s youth, anomie and insurgency bedeviling this south-south of Nigeria and this creates the picture as if the region is at war with itself.

The above mentioned features are possible because, the political class or elite who are indigenes of this region are involved in ethnic politics and so, are not able to bring both the Federal Government and International

Companies to a round table for discussion on how the region from where the nation’s about 98% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is derived. This imagined or actual division that is existing within and outside the political class is in tandem with what Marx described as class conflict. Conflict among different class members generates alienation, alienation broods dissatisfaction among those experiencing it. Therefore, Marx in Ritzer and Stepninsky (2014) always defines “class in terms of its potential for conflict; as individuals form a class insofar, as they are in a common conflict with others and the surplus value”.

To support this class struggle strand of Marx is the work of Miller (1991), which posits that “there is no one rule that could, in principle, be used to sort out people in a society into classes without studying the actual interactions among economic processes on the one hand and between political and cultural processes on the other”. This theory is appropriate in that, the economic mainstay of the nation and the relationship that exists between the different political elites of both the major ethnic groups and minority ones account greatly for the powerless politics that the Niger Delta people are experiencing in Nigeria.

To evidently substantiate this writer’s curiosity, some three hundred persons were purposively selected and interviewed in order to find out whether the Niger Delta people are involved in powerless politics actually in Nigeria. The table below at a glance shows who the respondents responded to the posed questions and their responses were analysed using simple percentage.

Table showing pattern of responses from respondents

| QUESTION | ANSWER | | | |
|---|--------|-----|-----------|-------|
| | YES | NO | UNDECIDED | TOTAL |
| 1) Are Niger Delta People involved in powerless politics | 280 | - | 20 | 300 |
| 2) How? | 250 | 40 | 10 | 300 |
| a) The region is made up of many ethnic groups | | | | |
| b) Their division is along language and location | 260 | 30 | 10 | 300 |
| c) They do not have one central ruler or heritage | 280 | 20 | - | 300 |
| d) They are divided along political line | 290 | 10 | - | 300 |
| e) There is mutual suspicion among each group | 280 | 15 | 05 | 300 |
| f) Each group struggles for supremacy always | 285 | 15 | - | 300 |
| g) Each group forms unhealthy alliance with major ethnic groups | 280 | 10 | 10 | 300 |
| h) They are marginally represented in armed forces | 280 | 15 | 05 | 300 |
| i) They belong most times to opposition political parties | 285 | 15 | 05 | 300 |
| Total | 2770 | 175 | 55 | 3000 |

SOURCE: 2016 Field Work

From the table above, it is obvious that the Niger Delta elites do not have a common front or might to control the resources prevalent in the region the reason being that; there are many divisible tendencies within and among political class. In the light of the above therefore, we can state that in reality that the Niger Delta elites who are privileged to occupy positions of power and authority be it in the military or democratic era occupied positions of the toothless bull dogs, as they shy away when issues that bother on the wellbeing of the majority are to be discussed. This docile position makes it possible for them to continue to benefit from the largesse accruing to them by the position they occupy at the centre, but the moment they feel marginalised, oppressed and dominated, they retreat to the region crying wolf, with the aim to garner support and have a platform to protest and agitate. This is also the pattern of politics in the whole of Nigeria, where ethnic or religious sentiment overrides national interest.

On this note therefore, this work concludes that the Niger Delta people are only able to practice powerless politics, as they are not in control of how their land, water and other resources in the region are harnessed, distributed and transported within and outside the territory. That is, the how, why, when, and who gets what from the abundance of the resources found in the region are not determined by them. Rather, the

region with its people receives paltry gift or sum from the Federal Government of Nigeria or its representatives in all matters concern them.

The political elites are not also able to muster support from other power players from the major ethnic groups in Nigeria in their quest to determine what happens to their region and people. Finally, internally, the politicians are divided along ethnic lines and what so ever benefits accruing to the region are most times lost or shared and pocketed by their representatives. The resultant effect is that majority of the people and the region are wallowing in poverty and deprivation and underdevelopment; this is evidenced by the number of Niger Deltans in Federal civil service, armed forces and those on Federal Government scholarships annually.

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