

Nigeria in the Niger Delta: An Allegory of the “Legs Tying the Hands”

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Abstract

This paper examines the potentials of the Niger Delta region in the Nigerian State using the historical approach as the platform for our analysis. We observed that long before the discovery of oil in Oloibiri in 1956, the region sustained the Nigerian economy with oil palm produce, fish production and other agricultural produce. The region is still endowed with other untapped resources that can sustain the region and the Nigerian State for a long period of time even after oil ceases to flow. In this paper our fears are expressed over the persistent existence of the hydraheaded monster of marginalization, oppression, terrorism, that has bedevilled the region, fuelled by the so called majority tribes and leaders. Unless the principles of derivation and resource control that were in use before 1967 and practice of fiscal federalism are adhered to for the sake of equity, justice and fairness, the lifting up of this imminent threat to the region will be a mirage.

Keywords: Niger Delta, Oloibiri, fiscal federalism, resource control, Nigeria.

Introduction

The Niger Delta region of Nigeria has been an important region long before the advent of the concept of Nigeria. Therefore the colonization of the region by the colonial leaders and the internal colonialism even after independence in 1960 is expected. No government would want to let loose a region within her colony that is endowed with abundant resources which may likely be the reason for the refusal of resource control by the powers that be.

Long before and early independence, the Niger Delta region has been the main stay of the Nigerian economy. The Nigerian economy depends on the enormous potential productivity and vitality of agricultural commodities. History has it that from 1558 to 1855 palm oil produce constituted the major export earning in Nigeria. In 1856 cotton became part of the export cash-crops. Also in 1895 cocoa joined the export list. Other cash-crops such as rubber, groundnut, beanseed joined the list of export cash-crops in later years. As earlier stated these cash-crops constituted the main revenue source, export and foreign exchange for governments to provide social and economic infrastructure. It was observed that agriculture contributed 72 percent of gross domestic product (GDP). It will interest us to note that the Niger Delta region sustained the Nigerian economy from 1558-1855, about 297 years with palm oil produce before the amalgamation of the Nigerian State (Ogunlowo, 2008: 18). The Niger Delta region was the major source of palm oil production. It is the belief of this paper that the Niger Delta region has the capability to sustain herself and Nigeria even after the exploration and exploitation of oil.

For better insight and understanding, the rest of the paper is divided into

- (i) Historical background of the Niger Delta region.
- (ii) Pre-oil Niger Delta region.
- (iii) The Era of Oil in the Niger Delta.
- (iv) Post oil Niger Delta, and
- (v) Conclusion.

Historical Background of the Niger Delta Region

The Niger Delta region has been in existence long before the British discovery of Nigeria in 1840. In 1380, the Portuguese passed through the Niger Delta and met the Izons who are the aborigines of the Niger Delta (Etekpe, 2007:1). The geographical landmark of the area covers 70,000km². It is described by the World Bank in 1995, as the World's largest Wetland and "Africa's largest delta."

Over the years, the determination and definition of the Niger Delta region has taken different dimension. In the 1954 constitution of J. W. Robertson and for the purposes of the establishment of the Niger Delta Development Board (NDDDB) defined the Niger Delta region to cover, the Western Ijaw Division of Delta Province, the Yenagoa Province, Degema Province and the Ogoni Division of Port Harcourt Province. These provinces as at today include the Southern Delta State, Bayelsa State, and Rivers State. However, the region was redefined by the NDDDB Act of 1960 to include areas like Akwa Ibom and Cross River States. The establishment of the defunct Oil Mineral Producing Areas Development Commission (OMPADEC) and the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) have redefined the area to include Ondo State, Edo State, Imo State and Abia State. This definition is political and covers oil producing States and not the Niger Delta Region. This study shall focus on the historical Niger Delta region that is defined to mean the South-South geo-political zone. The inhabitants of the region includes the Izons, Urhobo, Isoko, Ikwere, Ika, Ukwuani, Abua, Itsekiri, Ogoni, Efik, Ibibio, and Bini (Ibaba, 2005: 12. Etekpe, 2007: 4).

Pre Oil Niger Delta Region

The Niger Delta region prior to the discovery of oil in commercial quantity was dominated by agriculture. As earlier stated in the introductory section, the region was noted for palm oil and rubber production which constituted the major revenue sources for Nigeria. Apart from Palm oil and rubber, the region was endowed with fish and wild animals of diverse kind. This section shall dwell more on palm oil produce which was the main stay of the Nigerian economy long before British colonialism and independence.

Before the establishment of British colonial administration in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria, the region had an economic system that made provision for the needs of her people and the immediate neighborhood and beyond (Ikime, 1972; Aghalino, 1993). The region's palm oil produce was seasonal and subsistence. The period of collection of palm fruits extends from January to June and was controlled by a council of elders in each village and community (Aghalino, 2000: 20). The extraction of oil from the palm fruits normally takes about 21 to 30 days and was extracted locally using local materials with a village and rural community lifestyle of assistance. The oil palm is a traditional source of revenue for the people. For most men, palm oil was processed partly to meet domestic consumption needs and partly for satisfying social obligations such as payment of Bride price, purchasing essential articles such as salt or luxury items like gin and gun powder. It is important to add that the entire processing of palm oil and kernel was carried out using locally manufactured goods. In addition to the climbing ropes, locally made cutlasses bought from Awka smiths were used in the harvesting of fruits. The earthen pot was used for boiling palm fruits especially during the production of soft oil (Benjo, 1983). Other items used were calabash spoon. The mortar was used for pounding boiled fruits, while a wooden spade was used to scoop pounded pulp into the trough.

We believe and stressed that the oil palm made immense contribution towards meeting the socio-economic needs of pre-colonial Niger Delta people. At the domestic level, the oil palm had other functions. The trunk of the palm was use in building houses; its fibre was woven into fish traps, while the fronds were used for construction of thatched fences around the compounds. Palm fronds were also used as fodder to goats, while veins were used in making brooms. The palm kernel was chewed with maize, as snacks. Kernel was also fed to goats and chickens. The palm nut, after the kernel had been removed was used to cement marshy areas in compounds and foot paths (Usoro, 1974). The palm oil is ultimately used for cooking. The "banga" and "owo" soups, special delicacies are made from the oil. Besides this, the oil palm was tapped to yield palm wine. The pomade is therapeutic all-purpose oil which readily served as Sloan liniment to the people (Okumagba, 1980; Otite. 1973; Bradbury, 1957).

The Niger Delta people had been in constant contact with europeans for a number of centuries, but it was not until 1900 that Britain decided to penetrate into the hinterland of the Niger Delta. The intention of Britain was to establish Pax Britannica, in order for trade and commerce to thrive to her glory. Thus, between 1905 to 1911, the whole of the Niger Delta region was brought under British sovereignty after a spirited resistance by the people. Having subdued the region, it was indeed necessary to exploit the local resources, particularly the oil palm. The growth of the oil palm industry in Nigeria during the colonial period must be grasped within the framework of the primacy of the economic motivation of imperialism (Aghalino, 2000: 20).

From 1910, the colonial administration began direct involvement in the oil palm industry in the region as government policy started to unfold. British economic policy towards the oil palm industry in the Niger Delta region was influenced not only by the general agricultural policy of Britain in Nigeria, but its overall goals and motivations for occupying Nigeria in general. British colonial economic policy up to 1945 was characterized by a number of

agenda. Central to these was maximally exploiting the natural and human resources of Nigeria for the express purpose of securing profitable trade in the world market (Hopkins, 1973). It was perhaps this motive that influenced the British colonial administrations to place the exploitation of cash crops such as oil palm, cocoa, cotton, and groundnut, and rubber, topmost priority in her economic development programme in Nigeria (Crowder, 1968).

The colonial government believed in achieving the development of cash crops not by radically destroying and/or altering the people's existing indigenous production techniques, but "through the gradual modification of such" (Usor, 1973: 35). The modifications were to be effected through various ways. First, the colonial government tried to make available to the local farmers the kinds of seedlings known to increase the yield. Secondly, the colonial government sought to also improve the quality of the cash crops produced by the people.

Between 1935-1937, there was increase in planting. This may be attributed to the partial recovery in prices of palm oil after the great depression. By 1946, there were over 101 acres of plots in the Niger Delta region. Further explanation could also be sought largely in the dynamism and enterprise of the people who required cash earned from the produce trade to meet their social and economic obligations.

The plantation scheme in the Niger Delta as was in other parts of Nigeria failed in spite of the enthusiasm of the Department of Agriculture. As a possible means of stimulating the local farmers to accept the plantation scheme the Department of Agriculture influenced and advised the government to pass the Cultivated Oil Palm Ordinance in 1935. This ordinance provided that if a farmer registered his cultivated palms with the government and the oil produced by him from the said farm met the required standard quality, that is 5 percent free fatty acid, he would receive a "full rebate of duty which was in force" (Ekundare, 1973). In spite of this incentive, the plantation scheme failed as it was bedeviled by a number of factors mentioned above (Aghalino, 2000).

From the onset, British agricultural initiatives did not have much appreciable revolutionary impact on the economy of the region. With regard to the plantation scheme, its impact on the society was minimal. Nonetheless, its negative impact was that the acquisition of the few acres of land for the establishment of plantation reduced a portion of arable land for food crops in the region. The people claimed that the land leased out by the local people for the plantations were the most fertile areas.

The Era of Oil in the Niger Delta: Transition from Palm Oil to Mineral Oil

Mineral Oil exploration in Nigeria dates back to 1908 by Nigerian Corporation., this exploration could not yield any meaningful quantity until 1956 when Shell-BP discovered the first oil and gas in commercial quantity in Oloibiri in present Bayelsa State of Nigeria. This marked the beginning of oil exploration in Nigeria particularly the Niger Delta region. By 1957, the region had 24 oil wells this made the Federal Government to classify the rate of crude oil production by state of origin. The old Rivers State had 57.1 percent, the Mid-Western State (now Delta and Edo States) had 34.6 percent and the East Central State had 2.8 percent while the remaining 5.5 percent was produced from wells in Boundary lines between East Central State and Rivers State (Etekpe, 2007;52). The production of crude oil rose from 5100 barrels per day in 1958 to 582025 barrels per day in 1967. At present it is put at over 2 million barrels per day.

A break-down of production per State in 2004 shows that Bayelsa State remained top with a daily production of 784000 barrels per day, Delta State with 614000 barrels per day, Rivers State with 592000 barrels per day, Akwa Ibom State 11000 barrels per day and the other

States in the region produced 1000 barrels per day, making a total of 2 million barrels per day. The rate of production dropped between 2006 and 2009 due to militancy in the region by the youths. With the Amnesty granted to the militants of the region, production has picked up again. This brief analysis shows the level the region has contributed to the Nigerian State. The oil revenue from the region contributes approximately 90 percent of Nigeria's gross domestic product (GDP). The oil activities of the region have made the region barren of agricultural activities. The inhabitants farmlands and the aquatic ecosystem are completely destroyed. The region is neglected, marginalized and the inhabitants oppressed. The Amnesty programme for the militants by the Federal government has not yielded any positive development. It is the belief of this paper that the Nigerian State have decided to under-develop the Niger Delta region otherwise, a region that has sustained the country would not have been kept in the dark. This is where the allegory of the "legs tying the hands" came about. No wonder Marxism teaches us that the economic infrastructure is the basis of a society's survival and progress. This is why the neo-colonial ruling class went ahead to take over the major productive forces of the region. These are land, water and minerals found beneath and above, in and under these territories. Some of the laws enacted for this purpose are (a) Petroleum Decree 51 of 1969. This decree abolished the derivation principle applied in the distribution of natural resources revenue from 1946 to 1969. The decree expropriated all petroleum resources of the oil producing States and put them under the sole ownership of the federal government. This law was passed by the Gowon-Awolowo diarchy under the guise of denying rebel Biafra of access to oil money.

Note that in 1968, the same Gowon-Awolowo diarchy gave a directive to all oil companies to move their administrative headquarters to Lagos, the then capital of Nigeria. This apparently innocuous order had the effect of diverting financial and technocratic capital from the oil-producing region to, first the West and later Abuja (Darah, 2003:5).

Post Oil Niger Delta

Analysts have raised alarm that the oil in the Niger Delta region would soon dry up. If that happens, what then is the hope for the Niger Delta region? The Niger Delta region is endowed with several replenishable and non-replenishable resources which can sustain the region for God knows number of years. According to Sawyer (2008), the Niger Delta region is endowed with solid mineral resources apart from oil and gas. These include clay. Lime stone, lead/zinc, uranium salt, lignite, Gypsum, Manganese, Glass-sand, Iron-ore, Kaolin, marble, coal, Dolomite, Phosphate and Bitinum. Apart from the above mineral resources, the region has arable land for agriculture. As stated in section three, the land is fertile for the production of rice, wheat, cassava, etc. as food crops and palm trees, rubber plantation, etc as cash crops. The Peremabiri and Sampou rice farms in Bayelsa State by federal government which have been abandoned for donkey years due to oil and gas exploration and exploitation are living testimonies.

We envisage the same treatment if not worse against the inhabitants of the region by the so called majority tribes and leaders when oil and gas finally cease to flow. When the region stops to produce what other regions in the Nigerian State cannot produce the region will totally be neglected judging from the past experience. We therefore recommend and support the derivation and resource control principles that were in use before 1967 and the practice of fiscal federalism for the sake of equity, justice and fairness be implemented now. This will create an enabling environment to cushion the effects of absence of mineral exploitation – beyond oil in the Niger Delta.

Conclusion

This paper stresses the importance of the Niger Delta region in the Nigerian State. Its importance is reflected in its diverse resources available in the domestic economy as a source of major revenue to the people of Nigeria. Even before the advent of the British and the discovery of crude oil, the oil palm was vital to the people (Buchanan and Pugh, 1955). Beyond the flow of crude oil in the region, the region still has untapped enormous natural resources that can sustain her for a long period of time. The paper suggests therefore that for the sake of equity, justice and fairness, Nigeria should now revert back to the principle of derivation that was obtainable before 1967 and practice fiscal federalism and also combat corruption. This will assist in creating an enabling and cushioning environment for sustainable socio-political and economic development of the Niger Delta Region.-A stop to the scenario of the “legs tying the hands” allegorys.

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