

CHAPTER ONE

THE IJAW AND THE NIGER – DELTA IN NIGERIAN HISTORY

Prof. Ebiegberi Alagoa – This paper was delivered as a keynote address at the “Boro Day” celebrations of the Ijaw National Alliance of the Americas (INAA) at the Hition, Woodbridge, New Jersey, on May 24, 2003.

Definitions

The Ijaw and the Niger – Delta form only a small minority component of Nigeria, but defy all efforts to silence them.

The Ijaw/Ijo/Izon ethnic communities have lived in the Niger delta, the third largest body of wetlands in the world, for over seven, possibly, ten thousand, years. They remember no other homeland. They have completely identified with the environment and developed a culture fully attuned to it. They were noted by Portuguese pilots, from at least A. D. 1500. as occupying all the coastal marshlands of the Nigerian coast from the Escravos to the Rioreal (Bonny/New Calabar) rivers. They live in all parts of the Niger Delta bifurcates into the Nun and Forcados rivers and the many other tributary rivers of the Niger – Delta from east to west. They are thus bound by the large Nigerian ethnic nations of the Yoruba to the west, the Edo to the north-west, Igbo to the north-east, and the Ibibio to the east.

The Ijaw are, therefore, virtually synonymous with the Niger-Delta, but are not the only ethnic nation living within the region. The Yoruboid Itsekiri, though small in numbers, are influential in the western Niger – Delta, along with the more numerous Edoid Urhobo and Isoko. The penetration of the Niger – Delta by Edoid groups extends to the Epie-Atissa and Engenni of the Central and Eastern Niger – Delta. Several Igboid groups live in the northern edge of the Niger – Delta in the western, central and eastern Niger – Delta. The Epie, along with the Ogbia and other groups of the central and eastern Niger – Delta, are historically united with the Ijaw.

The Ijaw and the Niger-Delta have been a significant part of the Nigerian region and are not amenable to silence, because of their significant contributions from antiquity to modern times. The Niger - Delta has been a major centre of exchange of slaves and palm oil with the western world. Nigerian world and Atlantic Europe and America. At present, it is the centre of the petroleum and gas industries of Nigeria, supplying upwards of 80% of the revenue of the Nigerian nation. Indeed, petroleum and gas have become such crucial elements of the Nigerian economy and so completely identified with the Niger - Delta that the presence of these resources has become a defining criterion of what constitutes "Niger - Delta". Thus, the Nigerian government has expanded the geographical "Niger - Delta", constituted basically by the modern Rivers, Bayelsa and Delta states, to include all other neighbouring states in which petroleum oil and gas are produced.

Can we do justice to ten thousand years of history in a few minutes? We intend to present a brief account of the present situation of the Ijaw of the Niger - Delta, followed by an even briefer account of their past that gave birth to the present. Knowledge of their present and past may justify an attempt to predict their future. Such an effort may appear foolhardy, but historians do indeed, proceed from the present to the past in predictable fashion, and the Nembeljaw say:

Yenimbo She/he who knows wisdom

Biribois a project

We take this to mean that the work of the historians is a process of acquiring knowledge that endows the historian with the wisdom of a prophet, or at least, the confidence to engage in efforts to foretell what is like to follow the present that we know.

THE PRESENT

The Niger-Delta region presented an ugly face to the world in the results of the just concluded elections for Nigerian to attempt a successful democratic transition. The Niger - Delta states of Rivers, Bayelsa and Delta appear to have topped the list of states in which the elections show obvious and blatant signs of manipulation. These Niger - Delta states were also among those parts of Nigeria in which violence, in some places leading to loss of life, took place in the process of those in power taking every step to return themselves to the location of unrest, instability and of violence; and the Ijaw people as the perpetrators of these acts, have become common place in the contemporary history of Nigeria.

The contemporary historian of Nigerian is confronted with issues arising from the condition of the Niger - Delta, highlighted by the conditions of object poverty under which the Ijaw and other inhabitants of the region live. Nigeria is bound to deal with environment in which to pursue its goals of economic and social development. The processes for the production of petroleum and gas from the Niger - Delta, and the political conditions but in place by the laws and constitutions in which the wealth of the Niger - Delta is tapped and distributed, determine the contemporary history of instability in the Niger - Delta, and eventually, the history of the entire Federal Republic of Nigeria.

These material conditions have put a number of issues to the fore. First, is democracy a viable option in Nigeria? Second, how can the control of resources be demoncratized and taken out of the sole control of the central government to the state and local communities in which such resources originate? How can accountability be instituted at every level of Nigerian government so that aggrieved communities such as those in the Niger - Delta can return to a situation in which they can concentrate their efforts on self-development?

The current situation in Nigeria is the result of the perversion of democracy by the political class. Nigeria has developed far enough in education and society has gained sufficient experience to operate the institutions of democracy, but the political class has not yet developed the maturity and self-confidence to rely on the verdict of the people in transparent democratic elections. This situation is apparent to the majority of Nigerians, and was understood by a majority of the foreign observer teams which only differed in their judgement of the scale of the deliberate rigging.

Unfortunately, there was virtual unanimity among observers in placing the Niger - Delta states of Rivers, Bayelsa and Delta on top of the list of states defaulting in the application of democratic principles. We ascribe this in part to the lure of the oil wealth of the region which has corrupted the political class almost absolutely. Greed has taken over common care of the people and the imperative of redressing the long periods of neglects under which the region and its people have suffered in the Nigerian system. A second factor is the low level of development of civil society organizations in a new state like Bayelsa, created as recently as in 1996. In all of Nigeria, the long period of military dictatorship from 1996, has barely six years after independence from British rule in 1960, given the political class no time to the legacy left by the British in 1960. Rather, the current civilian rulers are former military people, or have mainly the example of the military dictators as practical examples of governance.

Resource control is the slogan created by the activities in the Niger - Delta and taken over by the political class to define the removal of mainly oil revenues from the Niger - Delta by the Federal Government. After years of negotiation, a fair return to the region, 13% of oil revenues, is now expected to be paid back to the states of origin, less production of oil and gas off the coasts of such states (the so-called offshore-onshore dichotomy)! The perceived indifference of the Federal Government to local complaints on this issue was one obvious

reason why the massive returns of votes in the region to the present rulers at the centre, was a valid cause to doubt the electoral results.

Indeed, the Ijaw and other peoples of the Niger – Delta region used support or lack of support for the cause of resource control as a litmus test for the acceptability of its local leaders and of the Nigerian political class as a whole.

Accountability has been all about absent in the governance of the Niger – Delta region as it has largely been of the Nigerian nation in the last several decades. Local governments have been grievously guilty of misappropriation of all funds released to them from the Federal Government. Similarly, the state governments in the region have not carried out development on any scale close to the sums received from the Federal Government. Inadequate as we note these payments to have been. The lack of accountability increases tension and instability, since the youths are unemployed, and see justice at every turn.

The present circumstances of the Delta: neglect by federal, state and local governments, destruction of natural resources by oil extraction, gas flaring and pollution, and other numerous evidence of social and political injustice. The populations left in abject poverty cannot but remain restive and openly violent on every occasion. Thus, in the last elections, the youths of Delta State were unwilling to vote, and did what they could to prevent others from voting.

THE PAST

The Ijaw people of the Niger-Delta have settled in the region over several thousand years. Evidence from studies of the Ijaw/Ijo/Izon language provides evidence of its status within the language of the West African region, and its distinction from the other major languages of the Nigerian area: Yoruba, Edo, and Igbo: from each of which the Ijo is equally distantly separated. Archaeological excavation carried out in the Central Delta and in the Eastern Delta provides concrete evidence of developments going back over a thousand

years, showing how deeply the culture, social and political systems of the Ijaw had developed in the context of their wetland environment. The rich patterns of oral tradition to be found in all the communities of the Niger-Delta provide documentation for reconstructing a history within the history of Nigeria as a whole, supplemented, from before 1500, with archival documentation resulting from the Atlantic trade in slaves, oil palm produce, and now petroleum, oil and gas. Indeed, the Slave Coast then became the Oil Rivers (from its supply of palm oil), of the West African coast before it become the centre of the petroleum industry in recent times. We may, thus, subdivide the past this region into a period of antiquity, a period of the Atlantic trade, a period of British colonial rule, and the period of independence from 1960-1996.

During the long period of antiquity, the Ijaw people laid down their cultural roots and Niger - Delta developed its unique features. The people apparently moved down the River Niger from unspecified homelands in the West African hinterland and made most parts of the Niger - Delta their home. There is now evidence of their ancient presence in most parts of the region in the Eastern Niger - Delta, and the Northern peripheries in the central Delta as well as along the Atlantic coastal beaches.

The oil palm tree, the source of Nigeria's wealth in the period of the Atlantic trade was present three thousand years ago, and terra-cotta figurines and bronze artifacts suggest beginnings of sizeable polities, as well as economic and other exchanges across the length and breadth of the region and beyond, into the Nigerian hinterland.

By the period of the arrival on the coast of the Niger-Delta of European adventures and traders in the late fifteenth century, there were already state formations in parts of the Eastern Niger - Delta and organized village democratic formations in all parts of the Niger - Delta. Fishing, farming, salt manufacturing, and trading within and beyond the region was mainly in the

centers of population with growing central political control. The new patterns of trade strengthened these centres which blossomed into full grown city-states, kingdoms or trading states, dealing first in slaves, then palm produce, and a variety of other goods. The Ijaw people, whether organized into formal state polities or not, demonstrated their ability to define their resources in this period. The Ijaw city-states defended their resources through formal treaties, while the less centralized communities also took steps to intercept trade, in order to obtain a return from the profits of the external Atlantic trade.

The period of the Atlantic trade was, therefore, one in which the people of the Niger-Delta played a pivotal role in the history of Nigeria, serving as the middlemen in the contact process between the Nigeria hinterland and the west. It was a period during which the people of the Niger - Delta dealt as sovereign peoples or a basis of partnership, signing treaties and mutually acceptable business and political agreements; and the Niger-Delta was a clearing house of Nigerian external trade. The colonial period reversed these promising trends. It was preceded by progressive steps of unilateral actions, the use of gun boats, the imposition of consular posts, and eventually, trade monopoly and political control. The rulers that contested these steps were sent away into exile, or replaced (King William Dappa Pepple of Bonny, King Jaja of Opobo, Nana Olomu of Itsekiri, King Fredrick William Koko of Nembe, and others).

The slide of the Niger - Delta region into the political wilderness in Nigerian history, therefore, began in that period. The centre of power moved into the hinterland, as the colonial authority moved its bases of operation out of the Niger-Delta to its peripheries at Warri, Port Harcourt, and Egwanga; and placed their major administrative headquarters at Calabar, Enugu, Benin, Lagos, Lokoja and Kaduna.

The shift of business and political centers out of the Niger-Delta, and the appropriation of its resources for the development of centers outside it, became practically established during the period 1960-1996.

The first civilian administration of the federation under Tafawa Balewa attempt to work through the Niger - Delta Development Board established by the departing British colonial government, to channel some resources towards by the military coup of 1966. Thereafter, one military dictatorship after another has perfected ways of taking out the oil of the Niger-Delta to serve the interests of other regions and peoples of Nigeria.

We note that in each period, the peoples of the Niger-Delta have thrown up leaders who fought in ways appropriate to the circumstances. In the colonial period leading to the period of independence, Harold Dappa - Biriye tried to combine various community activists to work within the new party political system seeking Nigeria's independence, to present the case of the Niger - Delta people to Britain. This effort resulted in the Willink Commission leading to the establishment of the Niger -Delta Development Board, Intended to "allay the fears of the minorities". The Niger - Delta activists also tried to forge an alliance with the politicians of Northern Nigeria. Indeed, it was the fear that the murder of Abubakar Tafawa Balewa in the 1966 military coup had destroyed the final hope of the peoples of the Niger-Delta, that persuaded Isaac Jasper Adaka Boro, the subject of our present activities, to launch his "Twelve-Day Revolution". We note that it was after a northern officer, Gowon, took over the leadership of the military that Boro was released from prison to lead his final crusade to liberate the new Rivers State from the secessionist state of Biafra. It was during the civilian administration of the northern President, Shehu Shagari, that Boro and his team of Niger-Delta patriots were posthumously given national honours. Finally, the dictator, General Sani Abacha, became a hero of sorts in the old Rivers State in 1996. From 1999, the Ijaw people of the

V entered the present period of struggle against the rule by what may be better termed para-military than post-military, government in Nigeria.

THE FUTURE

What future can we forecast for the people of the Niger-Delta from our knowledge of their place in Nigerian history? Not a bright one if we went solely by the present history of the failure of efforts to use democratic processes to effect change in the fortunes of the Ijaw region. The present reveals only gloom. But the history of the Ijaw people, even as exemplified by the life of Adaka Boro, suggests that the future can yet bring hope for a people not given to despair. When I met Boro the first time in his prison cell, he remained hopeful and enthusiastic for the future. When he was about to launch his desperate, virtually hopeless struggle for a Niger-Delta Republic, his men wore badges bearing a star and a crocodile, and he wrote a band blazoned with a star, a crocodile, and a lion (Adak). For a people identified by a history of heroic struggle, there can only be hope in the future. A people of courage like the lion, adaptable to land and water like the crocodile, can only strive for the stars.

My prognosis therefore, is of a future, in which a vigorous civil society endowed with a sense of pride in its history and culture, will drive a responsible government of the people to achieve successes we cannot now envision.

I see a significant role in this hopeful future for you, the Ijaw men and women in Diaspora in the West. You can serve as the stimulus for getting things moving in the direction of change for a better future.

Thank you, and may God bless the Ijaw and all people of the Niger Delta.