
Early Resistance to Economic Exploitation in the Niger Delta Area of Nigeria

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Abstract: In recent times the Niger delta has become a very volatile zone. The surge of disturbances, civil as well armed conflicts dominated. Factors ranging from acute scarcity of land because of expanding oil activity, degradation of land and water due to oil pollution, exploitation by the multinationals, neglect in the midst of plenty, to expression of economic and political disparity are advanced for the crises. It is important to note that resistance to economic exploitation is not new in the history of the Niger Delta. Contrary to Akoda's [1] assertion that Adaka Boro Saga of 1966 marked the beginning of a noticeable agitation in the Niger Delta, one make bold to say that the current happenings in the Niger Delta, had historical antecedents. There were series of early resistance to economic exploitation in the Niger Delta. This paper therefore gives a historical discourse on issues of economic control and management that triggered confrontations between the European merchants and the Niger Delta People. It highlights how the gradual penetration of the Europeans into the hinterland for economic control met with fierce reactions from the people. The paper concludes that the struggles for economic emancipation by the deltas, though very tough, were eventually subdued by superior British naval power.

Keywords: Exploitation, Resistance, Economy, Niger Delta

1. Introduction

There are some basic terminologies used in this discussion that need clarification. They are: Exploitation, Economy and Resistance. Exploitation: Most often the word exploitation is associated with economic exploitation, and it is the act of using another person's labour without offering them adequate compensation. It also refers to exploitation of natural resources. When use in this regard it means the use of natural resources for economic growth. Exploitation can also mean the process of making use of something in order to gain as much as possible from it [2]. To the subject area therefore, exploitation is the use of the labour and the natural resources of Niger Delta for the economic growth of Metropolitan Europe without adequate compensation to the people.

Economy: An economy is a system of institutions and organizations that either help to facilitate or are directly involve in the production and distribution of goods and services. Economy sustains the people and if there are no resources economy cannot be sustained. Economic resources are the inputs use to create things or produce valuable consumer products. The major economic resources are: Land,

labour and capital. Land is all real estate and all natural resources on or in it, such as trees, mineral element, iron ore, gold, diamond, gas, oil, crops etc. Niger delta is blessed with these resources. Labour deals with human resources such as wage-earning workers and capital includes plants and equipment use in the production of final goods such as heavy duty machinery, trucks etc. It is important to note that improper use of resources may cause business or even entire economy to fail. Economic exploitation was indeed a key part of European-Niger Delta relations. The way the Europeans grabbed the resources of the people, hijacked the middleman's position from the indigenes led to total economic failure, hence the resistance.

Resistance: According to Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary [3], resistance is dislike of or opposition to a plan, an idea; it is the act of using force to oppose somebody or something. A resistance movement is an organized effort by some portion of the civil population of a country to resist the legally established government or an occupying power and to disrupt civil order and stability. It can also be any irregular armed force that rises up against an enforced or established authority, government or administration. There are many

forms of resistance in relation to different power domination and actors. Some resistance takes place in order to oppose change or reform the exploitation of the capitalist economic systems, while other resistance takes place against the state or authority in power. As will be seen in this study the resistance movement in the Niger Delta was an organized effort to oppose an enforced exploitation of their resources.

The Niger Delta region of Nigeria has been aptly described by Alagoa [4] to include that geographical entity that lies between the Forcados River on the west and the Brass River to the east. The area between the Forcados and Pennington Rivers is referred to as the Western Delta; between the Pennington and the Nun constitute the Central Delta, while the area between the Nun and Bonny is the Eastern delta. The Niger delta has a well – endowed geographical environment. The waters, the rivers deposit very rich deltaic soil. Also the presence of waters made arable land very scarce resources in the Niger Delta. The differences in the type of deltaic soil deposited, nature of the water sand differences in vegetation necessitated contact of the delta peoples with the hinterland people. Trade and trading routes within the delta which cater for local needs existed. There were long and short distance trade links. Naturally the Niger Delta is economically well endowed with resources. These resources are very vital to the existence and survival of human society. Not only that, in economics it is generally believed that resources are relatively scarce and contested for. As much as possible therefore people contest, access, control and manage their God-given resources for their own survival. Any attempt to the contrary is usually resisted and this was/is the experience of the Niger delta.

2. The Presence of the Europeans and Gradual Penetration to the Interior

A very important historical factor that encouraged European interests in pre-colonial Niger Delta was trade, and the British claim over the area later was the realization of the economic potentials of the area and the need to exploit same. With the introduction of the Atlantic slave trade and later the legitimate trade in the Region, the Delta people became so strategically placed. They acted as suitable middle men between the Europeans at the coast and their trading partners/customers in the hinterland of the delta. The trade was beneficial to both parties.

The centuries of contact between the Europeans and the delta people produced a relationship in which the Delta rulers enjoyed full economic control and sovereignty. In this relationship the Europeans also depended on these rulers for protection as well as for trade and security until events began to change to the contrary. With time the Europeans particularly the British merchants sought to gain direct access to the hinterland markets, the source of raw material (Palm oil) for the trade. This desire for commercial expansion into the hinterland greeted the area with commercial pressure

which the people were determined to resist. In the Niger Delta therefore, pockets of resistance against foreign increase and control of the resources were noticeable particularly when the Royal Niger Company (R. N. C) sought to deprive the people of their legitimate right to control their resources.

It was true that the British traders were fully established in the Niger Delta with trading companies scattered all over from the Itsekiri kingdom in the west to Calabar in the east. The Delta rulers and traders declared Ikime [5] had been able to prevent European traders from getting to the hinterland to trade directly with and exploit the resources of the people. On the other hand the European traders became desperate about their hinterland push. This became easier with the discovery by the Lander Brothers that the Delta was the mouth of the Niger. With this discovery European activities therefore gained increase. Through the efforts of Macgregor Laird, British firms established trading firms at Aboh, Onitsha and Lokoja. Other trading firms like Alexander Miller Brothers & co; the Central African Trading Company; James Pinnock & Co. had reached Akassa, Ndoni, Osomari and other areas of the Niger valley, Dike [6]. Also it dawned on the British Consul and traders that trade in palm produce and other produce must be effectively controlled, hence the desperate invasion of the hinter land. In the words of Dike [6], with the invasion of the Niger valley by the British firms/traders, the hinterland oil markets were no longer the preserve of the Delta middle men. British factories “spring up like mushroom.”

The European penetration had adverse economic implications for the Niger Delta. In the first place, the European traders tightly controlled the trade through acute competition; they combined to fix prices which were usually very low. The Delta middlemen resisted this agreement and were so unanimous in doing it unlike the British traders who never trusted one another; so they easily broke their own agreement, Dike [6]. More devastating in its economic implication was that this European penetration threatened the livelihood of the Delta traders and the people in general. The numerous trading firms used their streamers, passed above the delta middlemen and intercepted the produce that used to pass through the hands of the middlemen. To the Delta people the commercial expansion and exploitation of the firms brought untold hardship and economic pressure which they were determined to resist.

3. Cases of Resistance to Economic Exploitation in the Niger Delta

In Bonny as early as 1844, Bonny authority under the leadership of King Dappa Pepple violently resisted what he termed British insult to his authority. As the European penetration threatened the livelihood of the Delta traders, he effectively prevented British merchants from directly transacting business with the local people. He insisted on maintaining his middleman’s position. According to Ikime [5], the people took up armed resistance and in the war that

ensued in 1844, the people damaged British warships, seized a number of the traders and promised to "roast them alive". By the 1850s King Pepple strengthened his economic position and political control, thus controlling the trade of Bonny more closely. The contentions between King Pepple and Consul Beecroft continued until an occasion, flimsy of course was found to depose him in 1854. He was accused of stopping all trade and trying to revive the trade in slave. Base on this he was taken to Fernando Po where he remained until 1864, Ekundayo [7]. The issue at stake was who controlled the economy. King Dappa would not accept exploitation through direct trading hence the battle between him and the Europeans.

Brass a coastal town had a long tradition of commercial activities with Aboh. Aboh got her palm produce from inland markets of Igala, Isoko, Onitsha and Ukwuani which she sold to Brass in exchange for arms and ammunitions and other European goods. The rapid inland push and over bearing economic activities of Macgregor Laird trading boys in dictating their own prices and monopolizing Aboh trade were vehemently resisted, because goods coming from Onitsha, Lokoja to Aboh now went directly to European stations at these towns. Aboh opposition to this economic exploitation was ruthless. The ruthless character of Aboh opposition to this economic exploitation says Dike [6] forced Macgregor Laird to close down its station. The Royal Niger Company (R. N. C) under Goldie bought up the firms, established a monopoly and dictated its own prices there by cutting off Aboh from her traditional commercial markets. This commercial pressure and exploitation was again resisted by attacking Goldie's station at Aboh in 1882. In a counter reaction British naval bombarded Aboh killing several hundreds, [6]. Thus Aboh fell economically. That she failed in this resistance to economic exploitation was due to the presence of British naval power which littered the coastal communities at this period.

With the fall of Aboh, Brass her commercial ally suffered, her prosperity declined. To compound this problem the R. N. C introduced crippling economic monopoly. Brass traders were forced to obtain expensive licenses before they could trade as well as pay other dues and fees. Brass who depended on trade to survive could not meet the above conditions, her people became hungry and were reduced to poverty, hence the wide spread opposition to the Company. King Josiah Constantine Ockiya (1863 – 1879) and king Ebifa (1870 – 1894) led diplomatic appeals and negotiations to the European traders to leave their markets to them, but all failed, Alagoa [8]. In the failure of all diplomatic appeals, the struggle to free Brass people from economic exploitation took a different dimension of violent opposition and resistance. Writing on this, Ikime [9] declared that on January 29, 1895, king Koko successfully mobilized his followers, equipped their war canoes and attacked the R. N. C depot in Akassa, during which they killed some African servants of the company and locked up the stores. Brass resistance to economic exploitation was fierce. Although Brass was finally overpowered by superior British forces, Brass fought

violently in defence of her age long economic sovereignty. The people fought to free themselves from economic exploitation occasioned by the stringent economic measures and monopolistic tendencies of the RNC.

The western part of the Niger Delta was also not spared from the desperate move of the British merchants to control the trade in this area. Nana Olomu spearheaded the resistance to economic exploitation in this part of the Niger Delta. From the 1870s, Olomu family had become the wealthiest and most powerful in Itsekiri land, [9]. With his strong Urhobo connections, Nana controlled Urhobo oil producers with such a degree of firmness that palm oil was regularly supplied to him by his Urhobo customers. He established efficient monopoly of trade that was so difficult for the British traders to break, thereby consciously prevented the British merchants from exploiting the peasant farmers. So every move by the British to control trade and economic resources on the Benin Rivers was fiercely resisted. Tension resulted as the British merchants on the other hand were anxious to break Nana's monopoly of trade to their own advantage. After several unsuccessful attempts, Nana's fierce resistance was finally broken on 25/9/1891 when his capital (Ebromi) was burnt, Ikime [9]. This brought an end to any effective resistance to British control of trade and economic exploitation in this part of the Niger Delta.

The experiences of the Niger Delta in colonial and post-colonial period are not so much different from what it was in pre-colonial days. In fact with colonialism fully entrenched, political and administrative mechanism were evolved to ensure economic exploitation of the resources of the area for the benefits of Metropolitan Europe. The discovery of petroleum in the 1950s and eventual oil exploration marked the beginning of yet another exploitative drive for the natural endowment of the area to the detriment of the people. The multinationals were preoccupied with maximizing profit to the neglect of the people whose means of livelihood had been badly damaged through destruction of farmland, pollution of land and water amongst others. In the early post-independence Nigeria, there was the emergence of another important Niger Delta personality in person as Isaac Jasper Adaka Boro, who took up armed struggle for the emancipation of the Niger Delta from foreign and local oppression. It was quite obvious that at independence the British bequeathed their administration to an ethnically based polity, presided over by three major tribes – the Hausa Fulani, the Yoruba and the Ibos. In that setting, the minority groaned in silence over their deprivation of the national cake. Worse still, the Niger Delta from where the mineral sources (petroleum) were derived did not receive commensurate development. By 1965 it was clear that the oil-rich Niger Delta has become the booty of Nigeria but the state of developments was not commensurate to the bulk of oil tapped.

In the political arena, democratic imbalance prevailed. In the then Eastern Regional House of Assembly, the delta membership was 14 against 110. In the Midwestern state House of Assembly, Delta representatives were just 2 against

58, Tabekaemi [10]. Isaac Boro's Twelve-Day Revolution was a response to the gross socio-economic deprivation, exploitation and marginalization of the Ijaw by the Eastern Regional Government of his days, the foreign multinationals and the Federal Government. He formed his army, "the Niger Delta Volunteer Service" to fight the Federal Government on 23/2/1966 in a revolution that lasted for 12 days. The consciousness to control and manage the available resources within their geographical area, masterminded this resistance. So the pre-colonial experiences/resistance of the Niger Delta has crystallized into modern social movements and militancy as a way or means by which the exploited people demonstrate their grievances against exploitation by the oil multinationals and the Nigeria state.

4. Conclusion

This discussion has examined in historical perspective resistance to economic exploitation in the Niger Delta. Resistance to economic exploitation was fundamental and a reality in the Niger Delta, who controlled and managed their economic resources was the issue. Notable indigenous personalities emerged from the Niger Delta who contributed immensely to the struggle for emancipation of their people from economic exploitation. Men like Kings Jaja of Opobo, Koko of Nembe, and Pepple of Bonny, prince Nana of Itsekiri, all clashed with the British over trading rights, encroachment and exploitation in their respective domain. They fiercely resisted the British. Though they were eventually brought to submission by the superior British naval power, no doubt they were notable leaders who consciously influenced the direction of the control and management of their natural resources. Chris Orngu [11] is not far from this truth when he declared that in pre-colonial Nigeria some polities ... had a strong commitment to check the exploitation antics of foreign invaders. Early Post-independent Nigeria also saw some similar developments

emerged and checked. Therefore post-independence struggle by the Niger Delta for economic control and management is not new. They had ruthlessly engaged the Europeans in a similar drive in pre-colonial days.

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