

Ethnic Minority Problems in the Niger Delta

Charles Quaker-Dokubo'

Abstract

As a conceptual background typical types of minorities and typical sources of minority conflict are outlined. A historical overview is given of the problems Niger Delta minorities have been experiencing. Their grievances and demands are highlighted, and the responses of different Nigerian governments are discussed. As a conclusion a possible way forward is recommended, one which would take seriously the possibilities of decentralising and of creating a rewarding involvement for the impatient minorities before it is too late.

Introduction

For a long time, the communities of the Niger Delta have had serious grievances which have not been well addressed. Foremost is that although the bulk of crude oil, the country's main source of revenue, is derived from their lands, they belonged to the ranks of the most backward, undeveloped and politically marginalised groups in the country. This has been attributed to the

fact that they are minorities. They accuse the major ethnic groups of using oil wealth to develop their areas at the expense of the areas from which oil is derived. Another is that several years of oil exploration and the hazards of spillage and gas flaring which accompany it have degraded their environments, and left their communities desolate. Not only have farming and fishing, the main occupations of the mostly riverine minorities been decimated, but their territories have continuously lacked basic infrastructure and amenities, such as electricity, roads, schools, hospitals and potable water. These grievances have been directed against both the state and the oil companies, which have been accused of contributing too little in return for the huge profit they get from oil exploration.

This paper is to highlight the ongoing ethnic minority conflict in Nigeria's Niger Delta. The analysis is developed in five broad segments: the first section will provide a conceptual background to the study; the second offers a brief historical overview of ethnic minority problems and politics in Nigeria; the third and fourth sections document the conditions and consequences of the recent uprisings in the Niger Delta, while the final section delineates the study's central conclusions, implications or recommendations.

1. Conceptual Discourse

Minority group conflict constitutes the core of ethnic turbulence and violence worldwide. But in certain cases, defining minorities, or even ethnicity, is virtually an intractable task. In a definition that adequately encapsulates the critical, numerical and relational properties of the concept, a United Nations source describes minorities as groups that:

... are numerically inferior to the rest of the population of a state, in a non-dominant position, whose members possess ethnic, religious or linguistic characteristics differing from the rest of the population, and who have, if only implicitly, a sense of solidarity directed towards preserving their culture (resources), tradition, religion or languages.

(Thornberry 1980:257)

Thus in this study, minorities are considered to be culturally distinctive and relatively cohesive groups which occupy a position of numerical inferiority and actual or potential socio-political subordination *vis-à-vis* other cultural sections in a political community.

Depending on their objectives, socio-economic condition, and/or political



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aspirations, minorities may be classified or cross-classified into five groups, namely, ethno-nationalists, indigenous peoples, ethno-classes, militant or politicised sects and communal contenders (Surr 1993:17).

- Ethno-nationalists are historically autonomous, and often large and regionally concentrated groups that are committed to achieving or regaining independent statehood. Examples include the Quebecois (Canada), the Kurds (Iraq and Iran) and the Basques (Spain and France).
- Indigenous peoples are politically conquered, culturally isolated, ecologically endangered and/or economically vulnerable descendants of the original inhabitants of a region. Native Americans, Australian Aborigines and the ethno-nationalistic Kurds are examples of indigenous peoples.
- Ethno-classes are usually descendants of slaves or immigrants who play distinct, and socially inferior or politically vulnerable, economic roles. Examples of ethno-classes include blacks in the Americas and Britain, Koreans in Japan, the Chinese in Malaysia and the residual European and Asian minorities in Eastern and Southern Africa.
- Militant or politicised sects are minority communities that are engaged primarily in the defence of their religious beliefs. Such communities include Bosnian Muslims of the former Yugoslavia, Arabs in Israel, the Catholics in Northern Ireland and the Kashmiris and Sikhs in India.
- Communal contenders are culturally distinct groups in heterogeneous societies in which no single group constitutes a demographic majority of the population or in which all groups are, strictly speaking, minorities. In societies dominated by communal contenders, there is a general acceptance of the moral equivalence of all groups, all communities seek or hold a significant share in state power, and political power at the centre is often based on fluid or unstable inter-ethnic coalition. Most African countries, including Nigeria, are dominated by communal contenders.

What are the sources of the recent ethnic minority upheavals in Nigeria and other deeply divided societies?

In the first place, recent trends in global politics have contributed directly to the primacy, escalation, proliferation, diffusion or contagion of communal and ethnic nationality conflict. In the words of one observer:

The collapse of communism, the ensuing upsurge of nationalist conflict in Eastern Europe, and the increasing visibility of recession in the west, have given a new and urgent focus to problems of race, nation and identity.

(Szetfel 1994:185)



Secondly, the centralising project of state consolidation or nation building in many plural societies has almost inevitably involved the cultural devaluation, political repression and/or economic expropriation of the more vulnerable geo-ethnic segment of the political community. In Nigeria, for instance, the entire project of national politico-economic development has, since the seventies, been based on the massive centralisation and transfer of revenue derived from a few oil-rich, but ecologically endangered communities in the Niger Delta to other parts of the federation. In a global, moral and intellectual milieu that has become very sensitive to abuses of group and individual rights and other excesses of centralised states, such centrist state-building strategies and processes have invariably provoked both domestic communal rebellion and international stricture (Wunsch & Olowu 1990:218).

Third, in culturally fragmented communities, group identity exerts a powerful and autonomous emotional, psychological or consummatory role. In the words of Donald Horowitz (1993:23):

Ethnic affiliations provide a sense of trust, certainty, reciprocal help, and protection.

In all deeply divided societies, such ethnic affiliations have naturally acquired greater salience and attraction as groups have increasingly found it necessary to mobilise against historic and contemporary inequities and injustices in the socio-political process of heterogeneous states.

Fourthly, especially in the economically under-developed countries of the Third World, ethnic minority grievances have been ignited by competition for and by real or perceived discrimination in the allocation of such valued but increasingly scarce benefits of modernity as roads, clinics, schools, jobs and related distributive opportunities. As Robert Bates has shown, resource competition in Africa animates or exacerbates ethnic conflict because ethno-territorial constituencies or areas are the key prospective beneficiaries of state allocation decisions, because sectionally-based local or regional administration constitutes an important agency for the distribution of economic benefits, and because rival sectional elites find it expedient to mobilise ethnic solidarities in their competition for power and privilege (Robert 1983:219).

What then are some of the appropriate institutional mechanisms or policy responses for the mediation of ethnic conflict? In the past, generalised concepts of democracy, devolution and power sharing were regarded as the three major institutional paradigms of ethnic conflict management. According to William Zartman (1993:327):



Democracy can be an element in the successful resolution of ethnic minority grievances because it provides representation for various opinions through multiparty competition. Even though an aggrieved group is not in charge of governance ... it can make its voice heard through representatives in coalition or even in the opposition.

Devolution, which is commonly regarded as the territorial twin of democracy, provides some security for minorities through arrangements for local or regional self-governance and autonomy. These arrangements differ in the extent of autonomy devolved to ethnic minorities. The most common devolutionary mechanisms include confederalism, federalism, regional autonomism, regional administrative decentralisation and community autonomism.

To the long suffering marginalised peoples of the Niger Delta, majoritarian democracy and years of military misrule have failed them, so also has the so-called devolution by creating numerous local government areas. The only meaningful option that has never been advocated is that of making the peoples of the Niger Delta stake-holders in the oil industry, so that they could have a sense of belonging, and could benefit from an industry and a nation that for more than three decades of independence have treated them as second class citizens

2. Historical overview

Nigeria became independent in October 1960 with a federal system, designed by the colonial ruler, which from the very beginning was at variance with the aspirations of many of the minorities in the country. The federal constitution that was produced suffered from two fundamental and destabilising flaws. The first was the division of the country into three unequal regions, with the population and size of the northern region alone exceeding that of the two southern regions put together. The second flaw involved the political and demographic domination of the northern, western, and eastern regions by the Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba and Igbo majority nationalities respectively, and the attendant marginalisation of the over 200 ethnic minorities that comprise approximately one-third of the population of each region (Okpu 1977:128).

In essence the flawed, tripartite federal structure transformed the country's multipolar ethnic configuration, in which no single group constitutes a majority of the total national population, into a regional and ethnically skewed system, in which each region was polarised into majority and minority

ethnic blocs, while one region was big enough to dominate the federation. Although a commission was set up by the colonial administration to look into the fear of the minorities and to proffer means of allaying such fears, and although the minority-populated Mid-West region was carried out from the Yoruba West in 1963, the political aspiration of Nigeria's minorities for the security of their own regions or states was not given any real attention until the collapse of the first Republic in January 1966.

The first thirteen years of military rule that followed the demise of the First Republic featured several historic and dramatic changes in the nature of majority-minority relations. First, the suspension of civil-democratic rule led to the ascendancy of a military-bureaucratic alliance in which ethnic minority elements were disproportionately represented. With the counter coup of July 1966, in particular, the reins of power fell directly into the hands of Yakubu Gowon, an officer from the Angas tribe, an ethnic minority in the Middle Belt region of Nigeria, who relied heavily for political direction and policy advice on a group of versatile southern ethnic minority bureaucrats in the federal civil service among whom was Allison Ayida, P.C. Asiodu and Eme Ebong. Furthermore, Gowon's decision to divide the country into 12 states in May 1967 dramatically altered the configuration of the federal structure and the nature of majority-minority relations. By giving relative satisfaction to the long-standing ethnic minority demands for new states, Gowon's 12 state structure not only overturned the structural hegemony of the North, but also liberated many minority communities from the regional stranglehold of the majority groups and undermined local ethnic minority support for the secessionist bid of the eastern region (Suberu 1991:499-522).

In addition, the phenomenal expansion during the early seventies in the volume and prices of Nigeria's crude oil led to a fundamental geo-political shift in the economic foundations of the Nigerian state. Henceforth, the pivot of the Nigerian political economy would cease to revolve around the agricultural export of the ethnic-majority sections. Rather, petroleum export revenue derived disproportionately from the southern minority states of Rivers, Bayelsa, Delta, Edo, Cross River and Akwa Ibom had become the linchpin of Nigeria's economy. This ethno-regional shift in the political economy of the Nigeria federation appeared to present the prospect of a more visible role for the ethnic minorities in the politics of the country.

However, post-civil war reforms in revenue allocation, and in the Federal state structure, operated largely to undermine ethnic minority interests. Thus reflecting the unitarist and centralising project of military rule, both the



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Gowon Administration (1966-1975) and the Murtala Mohammed-Obasanjo Government (1975-1979) progressively de-emphasised the long-standing principle of allocation by regional derivation in the distribution of centrally collected revenues. Instead these revenues were distributed on the basis of population and inter-state equality. Consequently, whereas the old regions were the primary beneficiaries of commodity export revenues in the fifties and sixties, the new oil rich states were denied the export revenues derived from their territories by the centre. For instance, while in March 1969 50% of both off-shore and on-shore mining rents and royalties were allocated to the state from where they had been derived, by March 1979 only 20% of on-shore mining rents and royalties were allocated on a derivation basis. Indeed, in the final six months of the first Obasanjo government the derivation principle was expunged from Nigeria's revenue sharing system in line with the recommendation of Professor Ojetunji Aboyade – who, as a Yoruba from the majority group whose sense of equity is at variance with the demands of the oil producing minorities, was appointed to head the Technical Committee on Revenue Allocation.

The state recognition exercise implemented by the Mohammed-Obasanjo administration in April 1976 further underscored the growing subordination of ethnic minority to majority interest in the post-civil war period. While Gowon's 12-state structure had included at least six ethnic minority states, the new 19-state structure consisted of a total of 12 ethnic majority-dominated states and only seven minority-controlled states. Indeed, key ethnic minority-dominated statehood requests for New Cross River, Port Harcourt and New Kaduna (Zaria) were overlooked in the 1976 exercise, while some of the homogeneous ethnic majority states were fragmented into two or more states. This bias in the state creation process underscored the growing official perception of state administrations primarily as avenues for administrative devolution and resource distribution to broad population groups, rather than simply as instruments of ethnic minority autonomy and security.

The return to civilian rule in 1979 did little to enhance the fortunes of ethnic minority communities. To be sure, the ethnic minorities did in a sense marginally benefit from –

- the establishment of an American style presidential system, which required the president to obtain appreciable electoral support in at least two-thirds of the states in the federation;
- the introduction of the “Federal character” principle, which required broad ethnic or inter-state representation in the composition of key

national bodies;

- the strategic role that was played by ethnic minority constituencies in the electoral victories of the ruling National Party of Nigeria (NPN); and
- the commitment of the Shehu Shagari Federal Administration to a partial restoration of the derivation principle in national revenue sharing (Suberu 1992:29-56).

During the Second Republic, however, several countervailing factors worked to abort the effective advancement of ethnic minority interests. These included the NPN's ethno-regionalist zoning policy (which largely reinforced the traditional predominance of the three major ethnic groups); the somewhat centrist revenue sharing policy which prescribed revenue sharing conflicts between the Federal Government and the oil-rich opposition-controlled then Bendel State; the political fragmentation of the minorities; and the abrupt termination of the life of the Second Republic at the end of 1983.

Developments since the reintroduction of military rule in 1984 further aggravated the stress of Nigeria's minorities. Contributing to this distress are such factors as the numerous arbitrary acts of ethnic provocation and religious partiality by the administration of General Muhammadu Buhari, Ibrahim Babangida, and Sani Abacha; the deepening economic crisis and declining political legitimacy of the Nigerian state; the repeated manipulation and eventual abortion of the programme of transition to the Third Democratic Nigerian Republic; the accumulated impacts of previous decades of ethnic minority marginalisation; and the resurgence of ethnic nationalism in many parts of the world. In very few states of the Nigerian Federation have these latest waves of ethnic minority discontent and distress been more visible and combustible than in the oil producing Niger Delta.

3. The Niger Delta and Nigeria's federalism

Demands for more equitable and privileged treatment by oil-producing minorities of the Niger Delta, as well as struggles by them and other minorities to redress power imbalances in the federation which makes them internally colonised people, are not new. These demands began during the agitation for separate states in the 1950s and 1960s, which led to the setting up of the Minorities Commission in 1956. But they can be traced right down to attempts by politicians from the minority groups in the Second Republic to organise to wrest political power from the majority elements. The Niger Delta



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people have been in the vanguard focusing on the “national question” as a problem (Osaghae 1991:355).

Notwithstanding the Ogoni uprising which lasted between 1990 and 1993, the Odi direct action of 1998-1999 marked a new phase in the interesting interface of oil and minority Niger Delta politics. Not since the rebellion of Isaac Adaka Boro, Sam Owunaro and Nottingham Dick, who declared a short-lived independent Niger-Delta Republic in 1967 over oil related grievances, has any oil minority community sought redress in ways which involved mobilised mass action and direct confrontation with the repressive Nigerian state.

It was in the Ijaw town of Oloibiri in the minority-populated Rivers State that oil was first discovered in commercial quantities in Nigeria at the second half of the 1950s. Since then the Niger Delta has produced more than 85% of commercial oil production in the federation. Accordingly, the area's diverse ethnic minority communities have been at the receiving end of the country's inequitable distributive politics and revenue sharing policies and have been in the forefront of the political agitation for the promotion and protection of the economic and ecological rights of the oil producing areas.

Put precisely, the grievances and demands of the Niger Delta have involved three closely interrelated, but analytically distinct issues.

- First, those communities contend that mineral land rents, and perhaps oil royalties, should rightly and naturally belong to the communities or state of derivation.
- Second, the Niger Delta communities are of the opinion that a significant proportion of federally collected mineral revenues, including the lucrative petroleum profit tax, should be returned to the communities of the Niger Delta in consonance with the principles of derivation.
- Third, the Niger Delta communities contend that appropriate institutional and financial arrangements should be put in place by the Nigerian state and oil multinationals to compensate their communities for the developmental and ecological problems associated with mineral exploration and exploitation.

Indeed, a major feature of recent agitation in the Niger Delta areas, apart from the kidnapping of expatriate oil company workers and the demand of ransom, is the repeated invasion and blockading of oil installations. In 1993, for instance, the operations and installations of Shell were disrupted by about a hundred communal disturbances, leading to the loss of some 12 million barrels of crude oil worth about ₦ 3.69 billion. In Ogoni land alone Shell has

been losing about 8,000 barrels of crude oil per day since the Ogoni “rally” of January 1993. In all the company estimates that over 60% of spills and leakages affecting its installations are caused by acts of sabotage by aggrieved oil producing ethnic minorities of the Niger Delta (*The Guardian* 1992, 1994).

4. Government’s response to the demands of Niger Delta communities

The government’s response so far to the demands of the Niger Delta people has been a combination of some carrot and mostly stick, especially during the period of the Abacha regime. Half-hearted official response has centred around redistributive reorganisational and repressive measures (Keller 1983:381), while the demands of the Niger Delta people are for economic restitution and ecological rehabilitation.

For instance, in 1991 the Federal Government tried to address the developmental problems of the Niger Delta by asking the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC), and multinational oil companies in joint-venture with it, to allocate 3% of their annual investment in capital projects to community development programmes in their area of operation. This policy announcement marked a departure from the previous practice of discretionary and often perfunctory oil company investment and involvement in community development. But these changes came a little too late (*The African Guardian* 1991:35).

In June 1992, the Federal Government announced key revenue sharing reforms designed to contain the increasing and violent rhetoric emanating from the Niger Delta. First, federal statutory allocation for the development and rehabilitation of mineral producing areas was increased from 1.5% to 3% of federally collected mineral revenues. The oil-producing Niger Delta, on the other hand, continued to receive 1% of mineral revenues on the basis of the derivation principle. Second, a twelve-member statutory agency – the Oil Mineral Producing Areas Development Commission (OMPADEC), with headquarters in Port Harcourt, Rivers State, and offices in eight oil-producing areas of the Niger Delta – was established to administer the newly expanded allocation. This put an end to the controversial and ineffectual practice of disbursing the mineral-producing areas’ fund through ad hoc presidential committees. Third, the statutory allocation for the amelioration of ecological



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problems throughout the federation was increased from 1% to 2% of the federation account. Fourthly and finally, the military government committed itself to the establishment of a new national body on environmental issues and ecological emergencies.

These redistributive concessions to the oil-producing Niger Delta did not meet the expectations of the various communities. OMPADEC was established not to succeed. The chairman of the commission was not answerable to the various state governments of the Niger Delta. He derives his power from the President and was answerable to him alone. OMPADEC thus was faced with many difficulties which reduced the degree of its effectiveness. OMPADEC was an inappropriate or inadequate response to the yearning of the Niger Delta people. It was grossly under-funded, politically unrepresentative and administratively over-centralised.

Reflecting the failure of its redistributive and reorganisational policies, the Government has increasingly resorted to regulatory and repressive solutions to ethnic minority agitation in the Niger Delta. These "solutions" included the proscription or banning of ethnic associations; the official declaration of ethnic minority agitations for autonomy as a seditious offence punishable with the death penalty; the confinement, detention, arbitrary conviction, imprisonment and/or execution of outspoken ethnic minority elites; and the violent suppression, usually by military force, of protest and uprising by ethnic minority communities.

Under Decree 21 of May 1992, for instance, the federal military government banned the Association of Minority Oil-producing states, the Commonwealth of Oil-producing Areas and several other ostensibly parochial or sectional political associations. In May 1993, the then Military government announced a Treasonable Offences Law that imposed the death penalty on advocates of ethnic autonomy who conspire with groups within or outside the country, and proffer ideas that minimise the sovereignty of Nigeria.

Another obnoxious dimension to the government's repression of ethnic minorities has involved the violent military suppression of communal protests and uprisings. In November 1990, for instance, 20 persons were killed in Umuchem during disturbances involving the Umuchem indigenes on the one hand, and Shell and the Nigeria Police on the other. One person was killed and eleven were injured in the Ogoni village of Biara in April 1993, when the police opened fire on a group of farmers. The farmers had resisted the installation of an oil pipeline by agents of the Shell Oil Company. In January 1994,

law enforcement agents disrupted virtually all the activities that the Ogoni people had put in place to mark the first anniversary of the Ogoni National Day Rally.

5. Which way forward?

An important requirement for ethnic equity and justice in Nigeria is a process that would slowly but surely decentralise the control of power and resources away from the centre to the various levels of government. Such a process would involve the recognition of the rights of oil-producing communities of the Niger Delta so that they could control and use a significant proportion of the wealth derived from their territories. A significant move in this direction was the decision of the 1994-95 National Constitutional Conference to propose the allocation of not less than 13% (as opposed to the current 3-4%) of mineral revenue to the oil-producing communities of the Niger Delta.

Finally, since policies of reorganisation and half-hearted attempts at re-adjusting revenue allocation had met with failure, the only way forward is to make the Niger Delta communities “stake-holders” in the oil economy of the country. Stake holding is not aimed at dispensing hand-outs to those communities, but at allocating an appreciable percentage of revenue on a particular oil well to be managed by the people, so that proceeds or dividends will come straight to the community’s “Oil Company”. If the communities have a stake in the oil exploited from their communities – in which they have invested, in some cases with foreign capital – the recurrent problem of hostage taking, raiding of oil platforms and the sabotaging of oil pipelines will be a thing of the past. “Stake holding” will redress most of the issues of marginalisation and deprivation and give a sense of belonging to the communities of the Niger Delta, so that the goose that lay the golden egg could at least benefit from the egg.

The Ogoni uprising and the Odi direct action of the last decade of the 1990s formed a significant landmark in the struggle by Niger Delta communities to enjoy greater benefits from their exploited resources and to redress their marginalisation from state power. It is however not an isolated episode, but a wider awakening of the communities in the Niger Delta to a vigorous challenge of the over-centralisation of state power that also raised fundamental questions on the role of the minorities and the basis of the Nigerian federation on the political agenda. Although the Obasanjo administration has



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persuasively stated their intentions of redressing the vexed issues raised by the communities of the Niger Delta, the processes advocated for their redress is not entirely convincing.

Solving the Delta crisis may prove to be Obasanjo's most difficult challenge. Communities living in the Niger Delta have long suffered the dual attitude of a government indifferent to their developmental needs and an industry which threatens their traditional livelihood. While oil companies pay hefty royalties to the Nigerian government for concessions, little of this money ever makes its way back to the communities where the oil is produced.

After years of fruitless effort to find redress through constitutional process, the communities have turned their anger against the multinational companies in their midst. Oil platforms have been raided by "community activists" and expatriate staff have been held hostage. The government has responded with repressive crackdowns on local villages.

While Abubakar tried to placate the Delta communities with offers of a greater share of the federally collected oil rents, it is argued that the only solution is to make the communities "stake-holders" in the oil industry. Despite making the right noises, peoples in the Niger Delta communities are sceptical about Obasanjo's commitment, which they see as too little too late. Some argue that the crisis began in the late 1970s under the first Obasanjo government when many powers were stripped from local council and ceded to the central government. Many fear that Obasanjo will rely on centrally driven efforts to buy off local leaders or military measures to snuff out the rebellion rather than seeking a viable long-term solution through constitutional reform. But these are different times and such measures might only push the communities of the Niger Delta to adopt extreme counter measures.

Endnote

- 1 Dr. Quaker-Dokubo obtained his Ph.D. in Nuclear Proliferation from the University of Bradford, and is currently a Research Fellow of the Nigerian Institute of International Affairs, and a Member of the Negotiation and Conflict Management Group.

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