

Oil Exploitation and the Quest for Restructuring: Echoes from the Creeks in Anekwe Emmanuel's *The Liquid Black-Gold*

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Abstract

The perceived marginalisation of some of the federating units of the entity called Nigeria in devolution of power and management of natural resources was what ignited agitations for restructuring of the federating units. The income from oil which was and is still a boom to the Nigerian Economy is a doom to the Nigeria Delta region where the oil wells are located. Years of exploration by foreign oil companies have left in its trail sorrow, tears and blood. This manifested in environmental degradation as evidenced in pollution of water resources and destruction of farmlands. Irked by the generation of wealth to manage the federating units from their land without adequate compensation, the region is the most vocal in agitation for resource control and restructuring. Militancy to draw the attention of the Federal Government to their plight culminated in destruction of oil installations. Kidnapping and hostage taking as dramatised in the film, *The Liquid Black-Gold*. The armed struggled in the Creeks of the Niger Delta region of Nigeria is captured to sensitise the authorities and populace on the bleeding poverty that breeds crime. There is also the lampooning of the community leaders who are the collaborations with the multi-national companies in the exploitation of their own kinsmen for self aggrandisement. The cinematic narration advocate for change of mindset from combative approach to arrest the attention of the stakeholders to dehumanising conditions of the Niger Delta Creeks to embracing constructive engagement as typified in dialogue and persuasion. There is also the pricking of the conscience of the representatives of the people and the oil companies to de-emphasize pecuniary gains for service to humanity. It is believed that, adequate rehabilitation of human and natural resources in the region could stem the tide of agitations for resource control and restructuring.

Keywords: Restructuring, Niger Delta Creeks, Agitations, *The Liquid Black-Gold*

Introduction

In recent times, the word restructuring has become popular in the political lexicon of Nigeria. As the tempo, frequency and spread of agitation are increasing by the day, the spectrum of the agitators both for and against have different perceptions of the form of restructuring of Nigeria they want as dictated by the devolution of power and sharing of common wealth in the current federal structure.

To the south-south geo-political zone of Nigeria that produces the bulk of the oil wealth that is now the mainstay of the Nigerian economy, restructuring Nigeria in such a way that will allow each of the federating states to manage its mineral resources can ameliorate the problems of environmental degradation and youths' restiveness. Agitators in the south-west and south-east zone supported this pattern of restructuring back up with devolution of power to enable each region to develop at its own pace based on resources and creativity. This type of reformation, they contend, can resuscitate the agriculture and solid mineral wealth of the 1960s.

The priority of the North Central Zone, of Nigeria who felt marginalised in power sharing in their marriage of convenience with the core. Northern zones over the years is creation of more states that will allow for equitable maximisation of their human and material resources. It is believed that prioritisation of this agenda will give them, a sense of belonging in the restructuring. The core Northern zones of North West and North East who are the greater beneficiaries of the current structure want the status quo retained to ensure the survival of unviable states of federating units in this zone. Therein lies the controversy of agitation for restructuring of Nigeria.

Like most controversial issues in the Nigerian political landscape, issues that trigger these agitations for restructuring of Nigeria have been explored in the stage and screen dramatisation of Nigerian Theatre industry. Prominent among this is the agitation of the core Niger Delta zone of the south-south geo-political zone over environmental degradation, inadequate compensation and sharing of oil wealth derived from the oil exploitation in the zone over the years.

Dramatists and cineastes as the conscience of society, in their chosen medium of expression, seek to bring to the world's attention the

sufferings, untold economic hardship and the degraded ecosystem that was once the cynosure of the world. Dramatist and cineastes that capture these deprivations in their dramaturgy include Clark-Bekedero with his *All for Oil* (2000), and *Wives Revolt* (1999), Barclays Ayakoroma's *A Chance of Survive* (2011), Eddie Ugboma's *Oil Doom* (1981) and *Niger Delta Avengers* (2017). It is against this backdrop that this paper examines the agitation for resource control that culminates into call for restructuring in the film *The Liquid Black-Gold*.

Restructuring Options for Nigeria

Before delving into the agitation for resource control in the film, *The Liquid Black-Gold*, it is necessary to foreground our analysis with an insight into what is Restructuring and the options available to Nigeria:

To simply put it, restructuring is the process of decreasing the number of component parts that makes up a system and inter-relationship between them in such a way that the entire system works efficiently. However, restructuring, if not well planned and handled can lead to inefficiency or even system collapse. (Bello, 2018, p. 5)

To Okonkwo (2018, p. 10), "to restructure is to change an existing status quo in order to make it more functional". Deductive from this activity that hinges on replacement of an existing nature of a system with a new one that will be suitable to achieve the purpose of the system.

Political restructuring has had different meanings according to perception of scholars. According to Ahmed, Norafidah and Knocks (2017, pp 8-25) "it entails both political re-configuration of the country and devolution of powers to the constituents units as it is practiced in other climes." To Najjaku (2016, pp 16-17)" it is the re-organisation and re-arrangement of the nature of resource control by the various governments and regions to foster unity and development."

There is no agreed definition of resource control among scholars because of wide spectrum of its usage in many literatures. In the words of

Arowolo (2011, pp 83-88), resource control refers to the process by which component units in a federation are allowed to control their human and material resources for the purpose of accomplishing sustainable development for their people.

A survey of the perception of restructuring from different perspectives by the agitators and advocates in the context of Nigeria situation tends to be in tandem with this definition. In the wake of recent agitations for secession by the Nnamdi Kanu led indigenous people of Biafra, restructuring has been interpreted by some Nigerians as a tribe's secession from the entity called Nigeria. To others, restructuring means going back to regionalism as was the case under the parliamentary system of Government in the First Republic. Many have also defined restructuring in the light of practice of true federalism, devolving powers to federating units, as against the current system that concentrate powers in the Federal Government. (*The Punch, 2017, p. 2*)

However, taking clue from the grievances and agitations of the federating states and geo-political zones of Nigeria, numerous options of a possible approach to restructuring have been suggested. The devolution of powers from the Federal Government to the units with Mayors heading the 774 Local Government Areas is an option as it structured in some European countries.

Some political actors and observers are of the contention that, with right leadership and selfless, responsible governor, every state in Nigeria has the material resources, economic and human to be viable. They therefore decry the current practice of states going cap-in-hand to the Federal Government for monthly allocation. The advocated restructuring, they reasoned would allow each state to look inwards and use its resources to develop and send a specific percentage of remittances to the Federal purse.

To the economically minded advocates, restructuring Nigeria can save cost of governance. They opine that, the expensive structure of having over 300 representatives at the national parliament can be reduced to a unicameral legislature of one chamber of one elected representative per state. It is believed that, a federal structure of weak centre and strong federating units will reduce the scrabble for power at the centre by the

politicians and go a long way in curbing corruptive tendencies that is prevalent today.

While reversal to regionalism of the 1960s is being canvassed to address problem of marginalisation of some ethnic groups and nationalities critics of the proposal have expressed the fear that, if the 'major' ethnic groups in Nigeria complaining of marginalisation over the years are given the chance to control power at the centre, what is the hope of the minority groups like Ibibio, Idoma, Urhobo and so on. Nepotism in states with multiple tribal grouping is another dilemma that may instigate inter-tribal conflicts in the scramble for power.

Another major hinderance to political restructuring in Nigeria is the fear of domination. The problem with Nigeria is rooted in the fear of unity among the ethnic constituents of the country. This fear is predicated on the nature of allowing one ethnic group to dominate and is prevalent among the northern region of Nigeria. Sani as cited in Nuhu (2016) stated that, the north is opposed to restructuring because there is nothing to restructure. He argued that:

Those who clamour for political restructuring or true federalism to enable each region and or constituent unit to develop at its own pace are unwittingly advocating that Nigerians should leave as if they in different countries, where some citizens would leave in comfort zones while others would live on the fringe.

There is also reservation on whether, efficient management of resources that played out in the days of regional structure of the early 60s can be attained today. This skepticism is anchored on the eroding values and drop in level of integrity which tempts public officers to convert common wealth to personal use. Corruption and oppression of the poor masses by the political class are now a norm.

Synopsis of the *Liquid Black-Gold*

Produced by Jossy Okeke Jnr. and directed Anekwe Ikenna Emmanuel, the story revolves around the youths of Zede Region lead by Ebipade (Sam Deede) who irked by the environmental degradation and attendant pauperisation of the people caused by years of oil exploitation opt for armed struggle. Efforts to arrest the attention of oil companies and government for rehabilitation and empowerment of the youths is being

frustrated by greed and betrayal of kinsmen. Agents of the state and Federal Governments that should facilitate peaceful resolution for development of Zede are collaborators in exploitation of the crises for pecuniary gains. Subsequently, degeneration of the war of attrition in the creeks into criminality of killings, kidnapping, and hostage taking with the trails of sorrow, tears and blood, the warring parties to sheath their swords for round table discussion to reach a compromise of give and take for harmonioiius relationship of oil companies and the oil communities.

Echoes of Agitation in the Creeks of Niger Delta Region in the *Liquid Black-Gold*

Enactment in the film, *The Liquid Black-Gold*, a metaphorical reference to the oil wealth begins in the night with the wife of Ebipade (Sam Dede) peeping through the windows amidst sound of gun shots, while waiting for the return of the husband. The child later walk up to the mother to complain that, he cannot sleep because of the sound of the gunshots. He then asks after his father. Shortly, Ebipade arrives with his gun and mask. The wife welcomes him back with this remark;

Must you come back to us wearing
the mask, carrying gun and harmlet?
you send wrong message of yourself
to our son here.

Ebipade replies that:

No, I am sending the right message
about myself and my people to him
and that is what I want him to
understand and you too my wife.

The wife, who is not convinced maintains that, “violence can never be a solution nor a settlement”. The narrative continues with the justification for the armed struggle punctuated with the cinematographic back up of the struggle and the attendant betrayal of kinsmen and collaboration of government agents. My people have suffered and are still suffering, Epibade laments; “we have tasted anguish, despair, intimidation, my people have cried fro solace that never comes. A one time happy and

peace people”. In a flash back, the self reliance nature of the Zede people is captured, fishing in their rivers and using the same source for domestic activities before the beginning of oil exploration.

However, when the whiteman arrived with his oil companies, things changed because of the greed for the treasure of the region. As the argument between Ebipade and his wife continues on peaceful and violent approach, he is of the conviction that in a situation where able bodied men have been deprived of their farmlands and women left with no option but to drink from polluted swamps just because of oil exploration frw must die for many others to survive. The pathetic situation is backed with the site of destroyed fertile lands and polluted swamps.

On why some brothers and sisters are kidnapped and killed, Ebipade explains that, instead of being part of the noble struggle, they have turned round to kick their back. Our real enemies he affirms; “are the Government and those we have sent to represent us before the oil companies, our perceived enemy are the oil companies who out of naivety or ignorance or may be share greed have connived with these two enemies to rip us”.

Going down memory lane, Ebipade recalls that, there was a clause in the 1963 constitution that gave the power to manage natural resources to the regions. When agriculture was the mainstay of our country’s economy nobody ameded that section but with discovery of oil things changed. Resource control, he opines, “is the remote and immediate solution to this crises”.

On betrayal of kinsmen sent to represent interest of the people before the whiteman, Ebipade is pained by the fact that, they are just the lucky few that, the community vested with the power to draw to the attention of the oil companies to the plight of the people but instead choose to divert money and relieve materials for self aggrandisement. As revealed in a recruitment scene, they determine who get employed for the in-service training of the oil companies. The exercise is marred with favouritism of dropping candidate who passed written test for preferred candidates. The ladies selected is for the ulterior motive of going to bed with them.

Subsequently, the entire streams and rivers spill with oil wastes and fishes are dying in numbers. This is worsened with scarcity of clean water for drinking and domestic uses. In the process of searching for water by a group of girls in a neighbourhood, the non-challant attitude of the representatives of the people to their plight is depicted in their coincidental arrival with a flashy car armed with table water to sympathise with an ailing kinsman. Disgusted by this oppressive sight of their supposed representative, Ebipade resolve to mobilise the youths for action.

At the palace, what reveals the discrepancies in development between the urban and the creeks of Zede region is this remark by the Queen; “I am happy and our people are happy with this rapid development within the short period of mining operations”. She has hardly finish the statement, when a palace messenger dashes into report violent demonstration of the youths with attendant destruction of property as they approach the palace. The king (Enebeli Elebuwa) summons his chiefs to meet the protesting youths. He appeals for calm to listen to their grievances. A spokesman of the youths paints this gory tale:

Our people are suffering. Loot at us no clean water to drink because of pollution. Here, are our youths with our nets but no fish to catch. All the creeks have been poisoned by oil pollution. Our people are dying of dehydration and malnutrition. In addition, Ebipade interjects; “our sisters and mothers have become objects of sex abuse in the hands of those representing us before the white men because they determine who is enrolled for in-service training. Our farmlands that have been put to use by the whitemen, are we not going to be compensated for what? We want answers your majesty.

When asked to respond, Chief Paul (Zulu Adigwe) reports that, he was with the whitemen in company of other Chiefs the previous day. All the complaints, he claimed have been laid before them and they promised relieve materials as soon as it arrive by ship from their country. The youths who are not convinced request to sit and discuss with the whitemen. They, in addition want to be part of the sharing and

distribution. However, attempt by youths to meet, discuss and negotiate with the foreigners is frustrated by the Chiefs who infiltrate their camp and polarise them. With this division and factional leaders, the youths cannot reach a consensus on representation.

The State and Federal Government agents that would have mediate for compensation and rehabilitation for human and material resources of Zede region worsened matters by conniving with the perceived enemies of the people. The conflicts arising from oil wealth of Zede region thus become a multi-dimensional one of youths against youths over representation, Elites and the youths, oil companies and government agents against the youths. With the exploitation of these conflicts for selfish interests, angry and frustrated youths opt for armed struggled. This subsequently degenerates into killings, kidnapping and hostage taking among the warring parties.

After much tears, sorrow and blood in Zede region, reason prevail with the arrival of selfless military administrator, Colonel Musa (Ifeanyi Azodo), who beliefs in resolving the contentious issues through dialogue, negotiatin and compromise. The warring parties thereafter agreed to sheath swords and discuss on a round table the process of compensation, rehabilitation and reconstruction.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In this discourse attempt had been made to explore one of the contending issues instigating the agitation for resource control and restructuring of the country, the oil wealth of the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. To foreground the exposition on agitation over environmental degradation and pauperisation of the people, the much sought restructuring is examined to expound its potentials.

While a restructuring that, would give each of federating regions of Nigeria the power to control and manage their natural resources may be a viable option to the deprivation and inequality being experienced by the Niger Delta region in the utilisation of oil wealth, betrayal and greed of kinsmen and government agents as portrayed in the film may be another albatross. If the oil communities in Nigeria cannot speak with one voice to persuade the oil companies to meet their social responsibilities of compensation and rehabilitation, what is the guarantee that if given the

opportunity to manage the wealth, it will be utilised for the benefit of all, taking into cognisance, the level of unimaginable greed.

While the Federal Government of Nigeria has been doing it's best to pacify and address the grievances of the oil communities through rehabilitation projects and relieve materials, more still need to be done to put smile on the faces of the inhabitants of the nooks and crannies of the creeks. It is when this lopsided development initiatives are addressed that agitation and advocacy for restructuring will wane and go into oblivion.

There is also the need for a change of mindset of looking forward to easy money from oil companies and government by the youth and community leaders of oil producing communities of Niger Delta. They should be creative in diverting money paid for compensation and amnesty into other productive ventures. Evidence are bound of past militant leaders that have been enriched with compensation in cash and kind at the detriment of kinsmen.

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Filmography

The Liquid Black-Gold (2009). Prod: Ossy Okeke jnr. Dir: Anekwe Ikenna Emmanuel. Stars: Sam Dede, Zulu Adigwe, Justus Esiri, Enebilki Elebuwa, Gentle Jack, Kelvin Ikeduba, Hakeem Rahman. Ossy Affason Industry Nigeria Limited.