

Colonialism and Political Conflict in Contemporary Nigeria: The case of the Niger Delta

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Abstract

This paper explores the issue of colonialism and contemporary political conflict in Nigeria with particular reference to the Niger Delta. The findings from an extensive readings of related materials suggest that the colonial root of contemporary political conflict in the Niger Delta shows clearly in the area of the administrative structures that were established in the years before and after independence in which the people of the region are minorities; the area is experiencing development problems; the issue of oil politics and the ownership of oil and gas resources, and the role of oil multinationals. Thus, the region is engulfed in various forms of agitation involving youth groups, women, elders, chiefs, and even governments of states. The attempt to solve these problems over the years has been mere palliative than permanent. The paper contends that contemporary political conflict in Nigeria is an extension of colonially entrenched inequalities by the Nigerian state and suggested economic and political restructuring as panacea for colonially instituted conflicts in the federation.

Key Words: Colonialism, Political Conflict, Niger Delta.

Introduction

Reflections on the future of Nigeria following festering political conflict in the Niger Delta could best be understood as part of a general problem caused by colonialism. This is as a result of the fact that “in Nigeria the political circumstances, which propagate conflict, have been prevalent since colonial times” (Pogoso 2005: 41). Nevertheless, political conflict in the Niger Delta pre-dates colonialism. This is because the people of the Niger Delta had long interacted before colonialism. Furthermore, conflict represents part of the dynamics of human relations and scholars generally accept its inevitable (Deutsch, 1973:10; Burton, 1987: 137-138; Weeks, 1992: iv; Ross, 1993:14; Zartman, 1994:2; Deng, 2000:833; Imobighe, 2003: xvii)

Although there is no agreement on the accurate description of the Niger Delta, even among the recognized spokespersons of the region (International IDEA 2000:238), it is noted that the Niger Delta which is situated in southern Nigeria is “one of the world’s largest wetlands, and Africa’s largest delta covering some 70,000km² formed by the accumulation of sedimentary deposits transported by the Niger and Benue Rivers” (World Bank Report 1995:81). It commences in the north at a place south of Aboh called Obotoh where the Niger River forks into Nun and Forcados Rivers. The Niger Delta is a low topography region with network of rivers, creeks and streams through which the Niger River discharges into the Atlantic Ocean in the south along the coast of West Africa. To the west, the Niger Delta is bordered in a curved shape of about 480km² from Benue River and to the east by the Bonny River. It thus lies between latitude 4^o15¹ and 5^o30¹ of the Greenwich Meridian. Of the over 250 ethnic groups in Nigeria, an estimated 60 is living in the Niger Delta alone with a population of about 28million (Federal Government of Nigeria, 2005:25). Thus the Niger Delta reflects the ethnic complexity of the Nigerian state and is dominated by five major linguistic categories (Ijoid, Yoruboid, Edoid, Igboid and Delta Cross). Notably, ethnic minority groups in the region among others include Ekpeye, Kwale, Ijaw, Ikwere, Isoko, Itsekiri, Ogba, Ogoni, Urhobo etc. Of the many ethnic groups in the region, however, the Ijaw, integrated as a nation by conflict over oil resources, represent the “nationality”, and are assumed to account for 10 percent of the Nigerian population (Central Intelligence Agency, 2008).

The region is rich in natural resources including oil and gas. However, due to political exigencies, the region extends to its adjoining lands (Federal Government of Nigeria, 2005:45-50). The Niger Delta was one of the first of what came to be known later as Nigeria to be integrated to the global capitalist system about the 15th century through the Trans Atlantic trade in slave, palm produces and subsequently, colonialism from 1914 to 1960.

In contemporary times, the people of the Niger Delta hold grievances, which are sources of political conflict in Nigeria that are rooted in colonialism. Foremost is that they found themselves as minority groups in the country in the administrative structures that were established in the years before and after independence that marginalized them. Another is that the region is still experiencing development problems, which they had envisaged prior to independence. Again the region is endowed with oil and gas resources, which is the main stay of the country, but the region remains backward in the mist of plenty. The colonial government made obnoxious laws that expropriated them of the oil and gas resources in their land, which has been copied by the Nigerian state. The region is therefore left to bear the consequences of oil exploration and exploitation, which adversely affect their livelihoods by destroying farmland and fishing waters, causing pollution and environmental degradation. Meanwhile, oil multinational companies continue to reap huge profits, while contributing very little to the region. Thus the political conflict in the Niger Delta has pitched segments in the Niger Delta region, involving youth groups, women, elders, chiefs, and even governments of states in the region against the Nigerian state and its agents. This calls for the need to “unearth the root cause of conflict in order to properly understand it and appropriate solutions to be formulated and applied” (Osaghae, E.E. (1998:1). The history behind contemporary political conflict in the Niger Delta is therefore very important, considering the fact that colonialism as the root cause of political conflict in contemporary Nigeria with special reference to the Niger Delta has not been adequately studied in existing works. The paper relied mainly on secondary data. We will, therefore, in this paper, argue that colonialism is the root cause of contemporary political conflict in the Niger Delta and that it is a continuation of colonially entrenched inequalities by the Nigerian State. In this vein, the paper is divided into five parts. The second is the conceptual and theoretical basis. This is followed by the nature of political conflict in the Niger Delta region during the pre-colonial era. Part four addresses the issue of the colonial genesis of political conflict in the Niger Delta. The paper ends with a conclusion.

Conceptual and Theoretical Basis

Colonialism: Colonialism as a phenomenon cannot be defined in any acceptable way; it means different things to different people. Hobson (1938:7), one of the earliest contributors to the study of colonialism, in his classical study first published in 1902 stated that “colonialism, in its best sense, is a natural overflow of nationality; its test is the power of colonist to transplant the civilization they represent to the new natural and social environment in which they found themselves.” This means that colonialism involves nationality or racial relationship between cultures that hinges on the imposition of one over the other. It is akin to a parent - offering or superior - inferior relationship. Colonialism is not a mere transplant of civilization to a new one, but was realized through conquest and exercise of sovereignty over one political system by another. It espouses cultural superiority of the colonizers over the colonized. It is discriminatory against the colonized people. Similarly, colonialism can be conceptualized as “the conquest and exercise of sovereignty over one political system by another without integrating the subjugated system and assimilating its people” (Rubin and Weinstein 1977). Colonialism signifies unequal socio-cultural and political relationship.

According to Ekeh (1983:3), “colonialism refers to the activities of the European colonizers in the process of conquest and rule of Africa and the reaction of those who were subjugated to European conquest and rule.” Colonialism can also be seen as a social movement of epochal dimensions whose enduring significance exist beyond the life span of the colonial situation, lies in the formation of supra-individual entities and constructs (Ibid). The social formations include; (i) transformation of existing indigenous structures; (ii) transplanting of new structures from Europe without the underlying cultural and social imperatives; and (iii) the emergence of new social structures due to the dialectical relation of indigenous and new structures based on colonial situations (Agbebaku and Aidelokhai, 2005: 562). It was developments in Europe that led European states to colonize Africa and other continents. In Europe, the industrial revolution has led to the emergence of big business, which increasingly replaces the small business focuses prior to the 19th Century. In Britain, France, Germany, Italy the new class of industrialists were backed by powerful and strong banking interests. The competition that ensued led one business to absorb another by agreement, and larger concerns were formed to take the features of monopolies or cartels that control the production of a single industry or series of industries linked together. The competition of such monopolies in one country faces similar concerns in other countries that led to international rivalry. This was what gave rise to the struggle for raw materials and markets overseas, which led to the colonization of other parts of the world. Lenin (1975:106) argued correctly that colonialism is a logical outcome of capitalism thus:

Imperialism is capitalism in that stage of development which the dominance of monopolies and financial capital has established itself; in which the export of capital has acquired pronounced importance; in which the division of the world among the international trusts has begun; in which the division of all territories of the globe among the biggest capitalist powers has been completed.

It was nationalism which fired the ember of imperialism that led to the colonization and exploitation of colonies. Nationalism in the form of desire to exalt a state and to add to its prestige drives men into carrying their flag, their culture, their language, and their institutions into every power-weak area on earth, and it compels governments to justify, defend and champion the economic ventures of their nationals in foreign lands, especially weak ones (Palmer and Perkins, 2007:162). As nationalism and imperialism precipitates colonialism so also it is the same nationalism that has led to the oppressed and dominated people to rise up against the oppressors. This is through series of political conflicts between the oppressed and the oppressor, until freedom is achieved at last.

Political Conflict: Political analysts used political conflict and cooperation to classify the two forms of political action. Conflict refers to “antagonistic encounters or collisions that characterized many interactions carried on within or between political systems” (Plano, Greenberg, Olton, and Riggs, 1973:77). Political conflicts are responses to reigning political doctrines that manifest in various forms namely, protests, dissatisfaction, cynicism, rebellion, insurrection, revolt, civil war, disengagement, withdrawal, etc. The ways political conflict occurs have a relationship on “the dynamics of civil order and disorder in society, which touch upon the fundamentals of political organization on the creation of a civil public” (Chazan, Lewis, Mortineer, Rothchild and Stedman, 1999:197-246).

Political conflict in Africa has been characterized in various ways. Gluckman (1955) pictured “tribal conflict”, while (Ekeh, 1975:91-112) described it “civic conflict and primordial conflict.” However, political conflict need not be so rigidly characterized. This is because political conflict frequently takes place concurrently in the same context in five forms, namely, elite conflict, factional conflict, communal conflict, mass conflict and popular conflict (Chazan et al, 1999:197-246). The major problem with this form of categorization of political conflict is that they are not mutually exclusive. This was a fact, which the authors also acknowledged (Ibid: 217). Any form of conflict can be cross-classified into two or more of the categories delineated by Naomi Chazan and her collaborators. We wish to submit however that all these forms of political conflict have occurred in various degrees in the Niger Delta with perhaps the exception of the Marxist - Lenin type ideological mass conflict. Political conflict is a response to disagreement on issues bordering on policy, participation, representation, equity, equality, justice and accountability and governance. Political conflict, especially when it is violent poses clear threat to peace and stability of a country as a single entity as exemplified by the conflict in Nigeria’s Niger Delta.

Political Conflict in Pre-colonial Niger Delta

Previously, political conflict in the delta occurs in the form of inter-state hostility and / or wars over conflicting claims to land and fishing rights as well as over traditional leaders’ political jurisdictions between and among the predominantly city-states in the region. These forms of conflicts were to be replaced by other forms of conflict when two notable historical events which herald the arrival of a succession of European explorers, traders, missionaries and colonial officials to the Niger Delta in the 15th century took place and changed the context of political conflict. These were the Trans Atlantic trade in slave and palm oil (Ikimi, 2006: 210-212). The coast of West Africa became somewhat of a great economic interest to nationals of various European countries (Portugal, Britain, French, Dutch, Spain, Italy etc) in their search for slaves and raw materials. Initially, European merchants obtained slaves, which the delta middlemen procured mostly from the hinterland and exchanged for European manufactured goods such as arms and ammunition, alcoholic drinks, enamel wares, clothes, etc. The oversea slave trade contributed to hostility among the delta states and between the delta states and the European merchants, especially in their quest for slaves.

For over 400 years, the delta states’ kings, chiefs and their people effectively prevented European penetration into the hinterland (Dike, 1956: 10). However, internal contradictions in the delta states combined with external pressure led to the decline of power of the delta states and the subsequent European incursion to the hinterland. Britain which became a major player in the Niger Delta and indeed Africa had in 1807 abolished the slave trade and with her superiority in sea power compelled the European traders to turn to legitimate trade. In order to enforce the abolition of slave trade law in Africa, Britain entered into various treaties of “amity and legitimate commerce” with the city-states of the Niger Delta, aided by her “gun boat diplomacy”. However the slave trade in Africa dragged through the 1850s and with no alternative, the Africa middlemen had to turn to the “legitimate” trade in palm produce (Dike, 1956: 52). With the abolition of the oversea slave trade, the trade in palm oil took the center stage. The trade in palm produces was organized around a system referred to as the “trust system”. This was the system whereby European traders exchanged manufactured goods based on trust for palm produces with the delta middlemen, who in turn make similar arrangement with the palm oil producers in the hinterland.

Sometimes delays and failure occurred on the part of the hinterland producers, which was mostly caused by the tedious nature of the production process as manual labour was required that affects timely deliveries to the European traders. Furthermore, European traders were usually engaged in sharp practices. Ikimi (2006:211) explained the nature of conflict in the delta between coastal and hinterland dwellers thus:

One, coastal trader, angered by non-fulfillment of agreed supplies, used force to cart away individuals from offending families or villages who became slaves used by the coastal dwellers as trade hands, canoe-pullers, etc. Two, hinterland producers of oil having failed to produce the quantity of oil previously agreed on, gave members of their families as pawns to coastal traders, pending when they would produce the balance. Although these pawns were not technically slaves, they became such in all intents and purposes of the debt was not made good.

Due largely to geographical location and historical specificities, the benefits of both the trans-Atlantic slave trade and the legitimate trade were unevenly distributed, which bred inequalities and conflict. Therefore conflict between coastal states over lucrative trade routes and ports were not infrequent. Furthermore, the coastal states benefited at the expense of the interior dwellers. Again, both trades conferred a privileged status on the coastal middlemen, which made coastal dwellers to see themselves as superior to the hinterland tribes. This privileged position was to be altered greatly ones Britain became more determined to penetrate the hinterland. The Berlin conference of 1885 provided the platform under which British claims to the Niger Delta Basin was legitimized. The Berlin conference, which was at the instance of the German Chancellor, Otto von Bismarck, was called in order to avert a major clash among European powers over conflicting claims, to peacefully scramble and partition Africa. According to Coleman (1958: 41-42), three separate, independent and uncoordinated forces led to British penetration into the hinterland: (i), the annexation of Lagos in 1861, which was extended into the Yoruba hinterland; (ii), between 1886-1890, the Royal Niger Company, an amalgamation of all trading firms under the leadership of Sir George Goldie, was granted a charter to rule and trade in the Niger area, which led to the pacification of the north; and (iii), the occupation of the south eastern part was undertaken by the British Foreign Office, which led to the penetration through the Niger Delta into the Ibo hinterland. Consequently, three British territories emerged namely, the colony of Lagos, the southern protectorate and the northern protectorate. The colony of Lagos and the southern protectorate were joined in 1906 with Sir Walter Egerton as Governor and the two protectorates (Northern and Southern) were amalgamated in 1914 to form the colony and protectorate of Nigeria with Sir Frederick Lugard as the Governor-General. This was for the administrative convenience of the colonial enterprise.

Colonial Root of Political Conflict in the Niger Delta

Nigeria as a geo-political entity as presently constituted, came into existence in 1914 and this arrangement had its unique effect on inter-group relations in the country, but the administrative structure that evolved subsequently impacted greatly on contemporary political conflict in the Niger Delta: by 1939, the country was divided into three namely Eastern Nigeria, Western Nigeria and Northern Nigeria; by 1946, regionalism was introduced; and by 1954, a full-fledged federation of three regions had evolved; by 1963, 4 regions; by 1967, 12 states; by 1976, 19 states; by 1987, 21 states; by 1991, 30 states; and by 1996, 36 states with the end to agitation for the creation of states not in sight. It is noteworthy that the 1939 division of the country into 3 regions followed the natural boundaries of the Niger and Benue Rivers and the Niger Delta was separated into two (the eastern and western regions). The division also brought to the fore the fact that Nigeria stands on an ethnic tripod with the north dominated by the Hausa/Fulani, the west by the Yoruba and the east by the Ibo ethnic group, and entrenched the phenomenon of ethnicity in the body politics of the country. Ethnicity refers to “the employment or mobilization of ethnic identity and differences to gain advantage in the situation of competition, conflict or cooperation” (Osaghae, 1994: 11). According to Nnoli (1978: 69-70), ethnicity in Nigeria emerged in the context of the colonial contact period and in the socio-economic competition of different social groups for resources. Ethnicity has become a major problem in politics in Nigeria and adversely affected issues concerning the Niger Delta, in the sense that the three hegemonic majority ethnic groups are united when it comes to issues concerning the Niger Delta, especially in their “lip-service” development of the region and commitment to the exploitation of its resources. Ake (2000: 114) traced the fundamental roots of ethnic politics in Africa thus:

The most important is the character of the post-colonial state in Africa... the post-colonial state in Africa like its predecessor; its power over economy and society are enormous, arbitrary and it is largely privatized. For all but a few of its citizens, it is alien and remote, uncaring and oppressive. They encounter it as ruthless tax collectors, boorish policemen and bullying soldiers, corrupt judges cynically operating a system of injustice, a maze of regulations through which they have to beg, bribe or cheat their way everyday.

Accordingly, many of them have turned away from the state and given their loyalty to sub-national social formations, the community, sub-national or ethnic group. The appeal of such social formations is not, as is sometimes imagined, owing to regressive consciousness, but vigorous rationality bent on maximizing utilities.

Incontrovertibly, the problem of development of the Niger Delta was articulated by minority ethnic groups in Nigeria toward the twilight of the colonial era when they expressed their fears in the emerging federation. This led to the establishment of the Henry Willink-led Commission “to enquire into the fears of minorities and the means of allaying them” that recommended among others, that the Niger Delta region be treated as a “special area for development” (Colonial Office Nigeria, 1958: 94). By this the federal government became responsible for Niger Delta development. This was before oil became a factor in the politics of the nation and it was the basis for the establishment of the Niger Delta Development Board (NDDDB) in 1960 to address the development needs of the region. However, the board became moribund due largely to lack of fund and politicization of its activities. The development of the Niger Delta was to suffer the same fate when in 1976 the Federal Military Government created eleven River Basin Development Authorities with that of the Niger Delta River Basin Development Authority (NDRBDA) as one. Other federal government development initiatives in the region include the 1.5% special fund established in 1980 for the development of the mineral producing areas, the Oil Mineral Producing Areas Development Commission (OMPADEC) (1992), the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) (2000) and the Ministry of Niger Delta (2009). Unfortunately, all these efforts have not brought any sustainable development to the region.

Colonial development was urban centered in Nigeria. Colonialism introduced a money economy, taxes in cash and wage employment in the country. In addition, the provision of infrastructures such as pipe-borne water, good roads, hospitals, schools, housing, communication and recreation facilities were in major towns. This led to rural-urban migration. Unfortunately, the development of regions was only visible in majority ethnic dominated areas of the various regions. Apart from Lagos which was the then federal capital, development during this period were concentrated in Ibadan in the western region, Enugu in the eastern region and Kaduna and Kano in the northern region (Akinyemi, Cole. and Ofonagoro, 1979: 190-192). However, cities in the Niger Delta such as Benin, Calabar, Port Harcourt, Asaba, Uyo and Yenagoa substantially became urban centers only when they were made state capitals subsequently. Otherwise, the greater part of the Niger Delta remains rural and lack basic amenities, illiteracy, deprivation, diseases, insecurity, poverty etc. The rural areas of the Niger Delta have since become fertile breeding ground for rebellious insurgency activities by armed militant gangs.

The first of such insurgency in the rural areas of Nigeria’s oil rich Niger Delta region took place in 1967, which was crushed within two weeks- hence the name “Twelve Day Revolution” led by Isaac Adaka Boro, an Ijaw revolutionary leader whose activities during the ill fated republic has drawn wide inspiration for aggrieved youths of the region. About 30 decades later, this was followed by the repression of the Movement for the Emancipation of Ogoni (MOSOB), the subsequent judicial murder of the renown human rights and environmental activist, Ken Saro Wiwa and eight others in 1995. In 2004, crises between two militant groups led by Ateke Tom (the Niger Delta Vigilante) and Alhaji Asari Dokubo (the Niger Delta People’s Volunteer Force), each driven and partly funded by oil monies and actively deployed and paid by high ranking politicians to be political thugs during elections, transformed the political landscape of the delta. The subsequent entrance of the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) led by Government Egbomopolo alias Tompolo and other faceless militant groups in the conflict worsened the security situation in the Niger Delta with oil-related deaths increasing steadily and the tender-box that is the Niger Delta appears more combustible than ever. Militant groups in the region engages in terrorism, kidnapping, hostage taking, pipeline vandalism, crude oil theft and illegal oil bunkering, harassment of security forces, disruption of the operation of oil companies, creating general insecurity and dislocation of socio-economic activities in the region, leading to reduction in government earnings (Amaize, 2009: 1&5).

In a bid to ensure the observance of law and order in the Niger Delta, the Joint Task Force (JTF), a federal government security agency on the Niger Delta, often engages militant groups in gun battles, especially its recent attempt to dislodge the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) from its stronghold in the Gbaramatu Kingdom, which resulted to high collateral damages (Igbikiowubo and Amaize, 2009: 1&5). The federal government equally offered “amnesty, disarmament, decommissioning and reintegration process for repentant militants” (Yar’Adua, 2009). Thus, political conflict in the Niger Delta had degenerated to a war like situation before the amnesty reprieve. Furthermore, the oil factor as well as the role of oil multinational companies in the Niger Delta is also rooted in colonialism. The history of oil exploration and exploitation activities in Nigeria dates back to 1903 when the mineral survey company carried out studies which indicated positive results.

In 1908, the Nigeria Bitumen Company, a German firm, together with British Petroleum commenced exploration activities, which was interrupted by the World War I (1914-1918). It was until 1937 that a consortium of Royal Dutch and Shell Petroleum, called Shell D'Arcy (later Shell BP and now Shell Petroleum Development Company (SPDC), gain concessions to explore oil in the entire territory of Nigeria. The outbreak of the Second World War interrupted their operations, but resumed in 1946. Crude oil was however struck in commercial quantity in 1956 by the Anglo-Dutch oil giant in Oloibiri in present day Bayelsa State and in 1958, oversea export commenced with an initial consignment of 5,100 barrels (Omorogbe, 1987).

The 1958 Act ended Shell's monopoly and was joined by other international companies, namely, Mobil (1955), Texaco (1961), Gulf oil (1961) later Chevron, Elf (1962), Nigerian Agip Oil Company (1962) and Philip Oil (1965). These companies produced about 95 per cent of Nigeria's oil production capacity and hold about 98 percent of crude oil reserves, and are in joint partnership with government owned the Nigeria National Petroleum Company (NNPC). Indigenous companies as well as companies from elsewhere have since joined to participate in the country's oil industry. The Nigerian petroleum industry is huge with domestic infrastructure estimated at over 600 oil fields, 5,284 wells (60% on-shore and 40% off-shore oil fields), 10,000 kilometers of pipeline and flow lines criss-crossing the region, 10 export terminals, 22 petroleum storage depots, 275 flow stations, 10 gas plants, 4 refineries (Warri, Port Harcourt i and ii and Kaduna) and a massive liquefied natural gas project in Bonny and Brass (Nigeria National Petroleum Corporation (2004: 4) most of which are in the Niger Delta. Today Nigeria is world's 13th, OPECs 6th and Sub-Saharan Africa's largest producers of crude oil, which position has come under stress due to the conflict. Oil and associated gas revenue constitutes about 85% of Gross Domestic Production (GDP), over 95% of national budget and over 80% of national wealth. In 2007 alone, Nigeria earned about \$55 billion from oil exports (Nigeria National Petroleum Corporation, 2007).

Nigeria like most "petro-states" in the world, is a "paradox of plenty", enormous wealth on one hand (with vast consumption for a tiny oligarchy), yet marked by poor economic performance, toxic environmental pollution and growing inequality on the other. Oil dependent economies like Nigeria, in spite of their vast resource wealth represent some of the most morbid, chaotic, socially unjust and inequitable of all political economies (Lubeck, Watts and Lipschutz, 2007: 7). This paradox is more or less reflected in the Niger Delta by its positive oil resources richness, but negative trails of environmental degradation, impoverishment, crises and underdevelopment. Oil prospecting and exploitation contribute greatly to environmental problems in the Niger Delta; gas flaring, oil spillage, deforestation, pollution, destruction of flora and fauna as well as aquatic stocks, depletion of the ozone layer, etc. However due to the collaboration between the Nigerian state and multinational companies prospecting oil, laws stipulating the adoption of internationally acceptable standards by oil companies are not enforced up to date (Okunnu, (2008: 412). Multinationals are also accused of not living up to date in the provision of social responsibility to oil bearing communities. However, the corporate view has been that the primary duty is to produce financial value for shareholders (Hayes and Walker, 2005).

Allied to the issue of oil is its ownership, which is a major source of conflict in Nigeria that is rooted in colonialism. This is traceable to the colonial ordinance of 1914 on land and mineral resources, which is explicit in the sense that land and the minerals thereof are the property of the crown. The Colonial Government's Mineral Ordinance of 1914 section 1 provided that "the entire property and control of all minerals and mineral oil, in, under, or up the land in Nigeria, and of all rivers, streams, water courses throughout Nigeria, is and shall be vested in the crown" (Colonial Office Nigeria, 1958). This was a major source of conflict between the nationalists and the colonial government in the years before independence and, Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe, the foremost nationalist leader, who became president of Nigeria at independence ones described the colonial ordinance "obnoxious" (Omoruyi, 2001).

The implication of the colonial ordinance is that wherever minerals, oil inclusive, is found in Nigeria, it automatically belongs to Her Majesty's Government, or "Her Heirs" or "Her Successors". The successors to Her Majesty are the various leaders of the country that have rule Nigeria since independence in October 1, 1960 beginning with Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe to all those who has presided over the country till dates. That is, it is the Federal Government that owns mineral resources in Nigeria and not states and communities. At independence, Nnamdi Azikiwe, as a prime beneficiary of the "obnoxious" colonial mineral ordinance became silent of it so also were his successors till date. Like the way the nationalist leaders had termed the colonial mineral ordinance obnoxious, Niger Delta advocates have called relevant sections of the law regulating the oil industry obnoxious (Ekpebu, 2008: 6). Nigeria since independence has operated 6 constitutions namely 1960, 1963, 1979, 1989, 1993 and 1999 constitutions and intermittently with decrees under various military regimes.

All these constitutions and decrees have made provisions that govern the ownership of oil and other minerals, oil production and the sharing of oil revenue. As Ibaba (2005: 79-80) contends:

The oil industry in Nigeria is governed by state legislations; seen to be the legal basis and the fundamentals for the disempowerment of communities in the Niger Delta. The laws governing the oil industry constrain Niger Delta development in two ways: First, it strips the people of the ownership of their oil and gas resources, thereby denying them the opportunity to direct their destiny. Second, the laws fail to adequately protect the Niger Delta environment giving rise to environmental degradation, which impedes sustained development.

Specifically, the oil pipelines Act 1966, the petroleum decree of 1969, the land use decree 1978, the exclusive economic zone act 1979, the oil mineral pipeline decree 1990, the petroleum decree 1991, the land (title vesting) decree 1993, the national inland waterways decree 1997 and other relevant legislations including those dealing with revenue allocation are offshoots of colonial ordinances. These laws taken together vested all the land where oil is exploited, produced, transported, stored and the proceeds there of in the state and are therefore sources of conflict in contemporary times. However, the owners of land where oil is found can only be paid compensation and the amount to be paid as compensation also cannot be determined by the Niger Delta people. To put it more aptly, the Niger Delta has no power of legislation over the resources found in the region, and this powerlessness is rooted in colonialism. This has led to “the clamour for the enthronement of resource control in the federation” (Azaiki, 2007: 161). By resource control we mean “the practice of true federalism and natural law in which the federating units express their rights to primarily control the natural resources within their borders and make contributions towards the maintenance of common services of the government” (Azaiki, 2007: 155). The call for equity in revenue allocation was against the backdrop of the fact that at independence revenue from mineral resources were shared in the order of 50 percent for derivation, 20 percent for the federal government and 30 percent for the distributable pool account. The emphasis on the derivation principle was steadily reduced to nil when oil revenue rose to prominence in the years under military rule. Presently, the 1999 constitution has pegged the derivation principle at not below 13 percent. In addition, the federal government has total control over oil resources.

Concluding Remarks

This paper has attempted to understand contemporary political conflict in the Niger Delta as a reflection of Nigeria's colonial experience. This was as a result of the fact that the autonomous city-states of the Niger Delta were conquered by Britain and joined with other segments to form one country in 1914. The subsequent administrative division of the federation marginalized the region. Colonialism brought ethnicity into Nigerian politics. The majority ethnic groups, though, often squabbles when their various group interests are at stake, but are united on issues affecting the Niger Delta as exemplified by the look-worm attitude to Niger Delta development and the commitment to the exploitation of resources in the region. The issue of Niger Delta development has its origin in colonialism and reflects colonial development patterns in the country. However, considering the fact that the problem of the development of the region has not been adequately tackled since the colonial period up till this moment is an indictment of the nation's leadership presided over by majority elements in the country. Niger Delta development seems to follow only one imperative: keep the region underdeveloped for unrestricted exploitation of its resources. Resource richness has therefore become the greatest undoing of the Niger Delta region.

Similarly, the issue of oil, the role of multinational oil companies and the laws regulating the oil industry in Nigeria started during the colonial period primarily to expropriate the Niger Delta of its God given resources. The country has since taken a cue from the colonial government to make other obnoxious laws to govern the oil industry and regulate proceeds there of, which expropriates the Niger Delta of the resources sourced from the region. The way the colonial ordinances were issues of conflict between the colonial government and early nationalists in the past are presently re-enacted between the Nigerian state and Niger Delta agitators. Unfortunately the agitations have taken dangerous trend as can be seen from violent conflicts in the region. Though the externally-imposed colonialism has ended since 1960, but the Niger Delta gives a picture of internal colonialism, exemplified by the exploitation of its resources by the Nigerian state aided by foreign capital without commensurate inputs. This has led to a new wave of nationalism in the form of political conflict in the Niger Delta. This calls for suggestions. The major recommendation for correcting the colonially instituted political conflict in contemporary Nigeria is restructuring. Due to increasing discontent with the federal polity, ideas about restructuring (Amuwo, Agbaje, Suberu, and Herault, 1998) are very popular in Nigeria, and “Nigerians from all walks of life are openly questioning whether their country should remain as one entity or discard the colonial borders and break apart into several separate states” (Maier, 2000: xx). Therefore, the most productive scenario for Nigeria:

On the political front, the government should initiate a constitutional conference to allow a wide range of representatives from ethnic, religious, labour, women, political, and business groups to decide how they want to live. The result should then be put to nationwide referendum, which might create enough space for Nigerians to start talking and listening to one another. And ultimately, to fashion a political and economic order in which they feel they have a true stake (Maier, (2000: 300).

However, Isumonah (2007: 5-21) has proposed “a restructuring based on economic resources and activities of the Nigerian federation, in which component states can control their resources.” Instead, we submit that any form of restructuring without giving consideration to the political structure of the country may be defective, in which case, economic and political restructuring should be pursued simultaneously. Therefore, any restructuring effort should take into cognizance the following: (i) The need to constitute a fairly balanced political structure for the country devoid of the existing tripod majority ethnic groups manipulation; (ii) The reconstitution of the 36 states federal structure into a 6 states structure based on the already identified 6 geo-political zones in the country; (iii) The systematic reduction of the over blotted items under the jurisdictional competence of the federal government in favour of the federating states; and (iv) The need to grant relative financial autonomy to the federating units. This is not unmindful of earlier political restructuring efforts in Nigeria, and the fact that a national political reform conference in 2005 was stymied following a work-out by delegates from the Niger Delta region due to disagreement on the “derivation” debate. Derivation is a central principle of fiscal federalism in Nigeria until May 1967. The principle suggests the retention of a certain proportion from resources or economic activities located in the producing regions or states. Under colonial government, it was 50%, but was whittled down in favour of the center over the years to as low as 1.5% before it appreciated to 13% in 2000. Finally, the way the vexing issues that are causing contemporary political conflict in Nigeria are resolved, to a large extent, will depend on whether this colonial contrived entity will survive or not in the years to come.

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