



Conflict and Resource Politic in Nigeria Oil: A Historical Analysis of the Ogoni Struggle, (1990-2001)

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DOI : <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17271483>

Abstract

This paper investigates the historical evolution of the Ogoni crisis, 1990-2001 within Nigeria's Oil rich Niger Delta region. Drawing from archival sources, secondary literature and oral testimonies, the study examines the interplay between environmental degradation, state-corporate alliances and grassroots mobilization spearheaded by "the movement for the survival of Ogoni peoples' (MOSOP). The paper argues that the Ogoni struggle mark a turning point in Nigeria human rights and resource control discourse, highlighting the nexus between environmental justice, ethnic identity and democratization. Findings underscore the enduring implication of Oil related conflicts for equity and sustainable development in Nigeria. The multi-international oil company failed to implement social amenities and economic enterprise to cushion the hazardous pollution of the ecological system of the Niger Delta environments. While the Nigeria government suppress any form of resistance from the oil region area even if legitimate with no iota to alleviate the suffering of the peoples. As the oil pillage and toxins polluted the aquatics life and the land; the indigenous elites like Ken Sara Wiwa and others organized themselves to fight for their survival. This led to the formation of Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP) in 1990. Their request and agitation center on the facts that they were not adequately compensated for their lands. As the struggles continue Ogoni leaders were secretly murdered by unknown gun men in 1994 and this state of affairs was used to arrest Ken Saro Wiwa. So that by 1995, he and his cohorts were murdered by Abacha regime on the allegation of masterminding the killings of Ogoni citizens. By 2001, MOSOP complaint to the Oputa panel for the injustice melted to their siblings. It is pathetic that despite their petition the government of Nigeria only pays a lips service to the conditions of Ogoni up to date.

Keywords: Ogoni, Mosop, Militant, Oil-Pillage

Introduction

The discoveries of oil in the Niger Delta was a historical landmarks not just for the Ogonis but to the State of Nigeria at large. It was welcome as a good thing for the Nigeria citizens perceived to enhance economic boom for the country. Every citizens were happy and was widely celebrated across Nigeria. Unfortunately, the exploration of the oil by foreign expatriate cause's oil pillage that adversely affect the ecological system of the Ogoni people who are majorly fisher men. As the pollution of the land drastically hindered the farming process of the natives the community started to agitate for resource control on the profits accrue from oil exploration. The failure of the government to seriously address this agitation of the Ogoni people led to the formation of 'MOSOP' established to seek for the economic and social benefits of the indigenous oil rich region. While the multi-national company deprived the natives from getting some benefits, the federal government of Nigeria used forced to submerge

any form of resistance. The subsequent conflicts in Ogoni land was difficult to resolve as government failed to address many of the peaceful agitation demand which subsequently led to the youths to look up to militant's guerrilla warfare against the multinational oil company and other ethnic groups in Nigeria who possess oil wealth to the detriment of the natives. This new phenomenon aggravated the conflicts in the oil region and the negative impacts on the Nigeria external trade usually disrupted due to the activities of the youths agitation for resources derivation for the people of Ogoni land. Ogoni land have for decades been enmeshed in one form of conflicts or another which resulted in number of loss of lives and properties, and this constitutes a serious impediment to the development and social harmony of the people.

Geographical Location of Ogoni land

Ogoni land is situated approximately 100,000km, East of Port Harcourt in River State. The area forms part of the coastal plains, harbouring terraces with gentle slopes intersected by deep valleys that carry water intermittently.¹ The Ogoni peoples occupy an alluvial plain bounded on the north by the Imo River and their Ibo neighbours, on the South, by the littoral flats inhabited by the Obolo (Andoni), on the east, by the Opobo River and the Ibibio, and on the west by the Ikwerre which stretches into the large city of Port Harcourt, Rivers State. Their main occupation consist mainly agricultural economy, as the population increases, most of the rain forest that once covered the area has been cleared for farming. Apart from farming activities they also engaged in fishing activities, living in close-knit rural communities in one of the most densely populated areas in Nigeria. In term of population growths it has been gazetted that Ogoni are distinct people numbering more than 500,000, who have lived in the Niger Delta for more than 500years.²

Brief History of Ogoni People

The reliable origin of Ogoni people is obscure. One historical narration was that they migrated into their modern area from across the Imo River. Another speculation was that they came in boats from Ghana and settled in the southern part of the area. Those who hold firmly to this theory draw the similarity in the common name of Ogoni 'Khana' as similar to the theory of Ghana origins of Ogoni people.³

The second theory that was basically base on myth captured Ogoni people as nomadic traders and peasants that may have originated from other Africa nations. It was narrated that they may have settled in the present day Volta Region of Ghana for many unknown numbers of years ago. Modern history confirms the fact that the Volta Region of Ghana once played host to some nomadic people who were extracts of the Africa Jews.⁴ Recently, Ahmadiel Ben Yehuda, the Minister of Information and National Spokesman for the African Hebrew Israelites of Jerusalem has been researching on Africa Jews in the West African Region. He confirms that there are numerous traces of Jewish customs, traditions and practices in the Volta Region where the Ogoni people are believed to have settled year's ago.⁵

The third version was that Ogoni people may have migrated from across the Imo River, this later theory basis its argument on the ground that the Ogoni people have a lot in common with neighbouring tribes that lives across the Imo River. This theory is flawed by the fact that it fail to note that similarities between the Ogoni people and their neighbours have to do with their interactions with the Ibibio, Igbani and Ibo people. The Ogoni people obviously had elements of other tribes in their culture as a result of interaction and that does not change the fact that they migrated from Ghana.⁶

In comparing the customs and ways of life in the Volta Region of Ghana to those of the Ogoni, it was discovered that the method of farming in the Volta Region of Ghana and that of the Ogoni people are almost the same. For example, the farms cassava and Yams that served as the chief crops are of the same with both region. And these two crops are planted in the same

ways in the Volta Region of Ghana as well as Ogoni land. Furthermore, there are several villages and communities, whose names are the same as common names, for example, in Ogoni land you found villages such as Eleme, Kpone and Bakpo with alphabets and pronunciation sounding in the same consonant peculiar with each other. The ancient structure of the two areas was also similar in style and method of building. Hence, the first historical huts were building with mud and thatches in a communal village called Nama in Kek Khana.⁷

According to linguistics classification Ogoni languages of Khana, Gokana, and Eleme were groups under the Benue-Congo branch of African languages or, as a branch in the New-Benue Congo family. Ogoni people established an organized social system which worked well under a monarchy and under which men and women of substance and agility enjoyed a unique status. In the slave trade era, Ogoni people were safeguarded as they lay on the slave route from the hinterland to the coastal slave markets. As a result none of the Ogoni peoples was captured by slave raiders. In this way, the Ogoni people were able to live in relative isolation during the slave trade. By the second half of the 19th century when legitimate trade was introduced the Ogoni people were able to purchased weapons. This adherently, led to strife and war skirmishes until the British invaded the area in 1901 and subsequently subjugated them in 1914 with a weak resistance from the Ogoni forces.⁸

Ken Saro Wiwa argued extensively. Stressing the need to be recognized and encouraged as ethnical governance and organization as part of the Nigerian state using a fair proportion of the natural resources in the land for the development of the people as way of protecting the Ogoni as minority group as well other groups.⁹ Let it be emphasized here that it was this struggle of Ken Saro Wiwa that brought Ogoni land to the knowledge of the comity of nations.¹⁰

Oil Exploration and the Socio-Economic Consequences to the peoples of Ogoni

As late back as 1958 Shell Oil Company struck oil in Ogoni land, which changes the economy of not just Ogoni people but Nigeria at large. The discovery of oil systematically attracts foreign investors especially the Americas and the Briton into the Nigeria oil sector. Everybody was happy in Nigeria as the populace hope that the discovery of oil was a blessing which turns out to be black oil regret especially in the Niger Delta. One of the major failures of the Nigeria government immediately after the discovery of oil was the radical drift from the agricultural sector down to mono-economy of Oil to the neglect of agricultural farm product before the discovery of oil.¹¹

Today, oil accounts for over 90% of Nigeria's export earnings and some 80% of government revenue, controlling the Nigeria economy. For the Ogoni, the environmental and social costs of oil exploitation were painfully high. They therefore, became hostile to the foreign oil company which led to the withdrawal of Shell Company from Ogoni land. The expatriate later went back under the protection of the Nigeria military. The peaceful protests of the Ogoni against the building of yet another pipeline were answered with gunfire. Hence, the prevailing incessant conflicts that occurred between July 1993 and April 1994 between Ogoni and the Nigeria army. It was believed the Nigeria government sponsored and equipped Ogoni rivalry with heavy weapons. For instances, a huge military operation was launched in April, 1994 by the government, supposedly to restore order, but in fact destroying Ogoni lives and property.¹² From the foregoing, the youths took it upon themselves to acquire weapons and arms to resist the Nigeria government that try to collapse the formation of 'MOSSOP' (The movement for the survival of Ogoni peoples).

Formation of Mosop

Prior to the formation of 'MOSOP', the Ogoni youths founded the Ogoni youth council (OYC) in 1989 through the effort of Marvin Yobana and others. The organization was geared towards making Ogoni youth's better youths than what they are in society by reforming their attitude from being thugs, violence and all sorts of nuisance in society to a better citizens. Since its foundation, the attitude of the Ogoni youth has changed drastically from what it was known formally for. They have been transforming from drug addicts, violence, cultism, prostitution and any other indulgence that will result in reproach to Ogoni.¹³

The movement for the survival of Ogoni people known as (MOSOP) was founded in 1990, to bring unity among the Ogoni people. It was headed by a known poet Nigeria writer Ken Saro Wiwa as its first president. Among notable founders of the movement were Dr. Barinem Kiobel, Baribor Bera, Nordu Eawo, Saturday Dobee, Daniel Gbokoo, Paul Levura, Mr. Felix Nuate, Chief Theophilus Orage, Mr. Samuel Orage, Mr. Albert Badey, Chief Edward Kobani, John Kpuinen, Dr. G. B. Leton and Ken Sara Wiwa as the a key pivotal of the movement. The Ogoni Bill of Rights (OBR) spell out her demands for the Ogoni people especially environmental hygiene, social and economic justice. The OBR openly opposes the methodology of revenue allocation formula under which the federal, state and local governments have almost overall power on the distribution of oil revenues. The Ogoni people felt that they were not adequately compensated over their land and the foreign oil magnate worsened their predicament.¹⁴

From the above perspective, rose the idea of forming a peaceful fraternity geared towards Ogoni agitation. The federal government under the late General Sani Abacha misinterpreted the desire of these intellectual loyalists of the Ogoni people. The autocratic governance, brutally executed Ken Saro Wiwa on 10th November, 1995 by the military Juntas.¹⁵ Despite the murdered of Ken Saro Wiwa 'MOSOP' continued demanding for a better compensation for their lost land. In fact, in the year 2001, 'MOSOP' participated at the Oputa Human Rights Investigation Panel sitting in Port - Harcourt. MOSOP called on the Nigerian military to accept responsibility for grave human rights violations by its officer corps against the Ogoni, committed between 1994 -1998. The senior officers who appeared for the Oputa Panel played down the evil crime and even denied any involvement in the arbitrary shootings, rapes, assaults and detentions. These testimonies, thus, seem to be nothing less than a disgrace to the whole purpose of the panel; to bring justice to the victims of these human rights violations was the US Supreme Court ruling that Shell International and its subsidiary Shell Transport and Trading can be prosecuted for their alleged involvement in the Ken Saro Wiwa death.¹⁶

The Nigeria government not minding the international pressure sabotage the activities of the 'MOSOP' by ostensibly setting up their leaders. It was alleged that on the 21st May, 1994, four conservative Ogoni leaders were murdered in Gokana Kingdom. Without proper investigation, Ken Saro Wiwa, Ledun Mitee and number of other Mosop leaders were arrested and accused of involvement in the murdering of the Ogoni members.¹⁷

The day after the killings, the Internal Security Task Force, a military unit set up especially to "restore order" in Ogoni land, under command of Lt. Col Okuntimo, stormed into Ogoni land raiding, burning and looting villages. While thousands of Ogoni villagers took refuge in the bush, hundreds were detained and tortured. Many Ogoni died in the weeks that followed. The persecution went on unabated, so much that on the February 1995, after eight months of being detained without official charges, Ken Saro Wiwa and the other Ogoni leaders were brought before a special tribunal, established by the military government. While in detention, the accused were often denied access to lawyers, medical care and family members. Independent international observers expressed their deep doubts about the fairness of the trial to meet Nigeria's own standards of fairness.¹⁸

Despite protest from the international community, the military Junta sentenced Ken Saro Wiwa and eight other Ogoni to death by the Special Tribunal on the 10th February, 1995. Ogoni community and the intellectuals were weakened but keep on hoping that the next democratic dispensation will usher in better recognition of their plight. Unfortunately, when in 31st October, 1996, non-partisans elections were held in Nigeria to fill all local government seats with elected civilian Chairman's and Councillors; it was largely reported that all persons associated with 'MOSOP' were prevented from participation, and those who presented themselves were either beaten or detained and later disqualified.¹⁹ In 1999, Olusegun Obasanjo government seems to be more committed towards the principles of democracy, human rights and good governance. Obasanjo was acknowledging to have sponsored development projects initiated by Shell Company that are visible in Ogoni land.²⁰

The Rise of Militant in the Oil Region

The proliferation of various military groups in the region and the spade of kidnaps, invasion of oil platforms, hijacking of helicopters belonging to oil companies and bloody confrontations between militant youth and both police and military troops are indication of an emerging culture of resistance. Alhaji Asari Dokubo a self-acclaimed messiah of the Niger Delta sent jitters down the spine of Federal government when he issued an ultimatum to all oil workers in the region to leave or face heavy consequences. He claimed there are over 312 commanders of different gangs leading various armed groups in the region. These gangs turned the area into war zone fighting for their interest.²¹

Consequently, in a recent finding virtually the entire oil region has been heavily militarized. Nigeria government determination to ensure her oil exploration used military might against the Ogoni resistance and the oil company employ divide and rule to thwart resistances. The indigenous elite also betrayed the youths for their selfish aim. Invariably, there has been an unusual high proliferation of arms, some of them very sophisticated in nature. It has also led to undue radicalization of the people and the emergence of various terror gangs.²² What is emerging in the Ogoni land is thus a persistent culture of armed resistance. Increasingly, the youths have hijacked the struggle from the older people and have turned the land into a battlefield. The situation in the region has serious implications for the Nigeria economy and stability. More importantly, the elites fear the imminent future of resistance and conflicts in the country.²³

The international oil glut and the neglect of agriculture aggravated the downtrodden development of Ogoni land inherent in the post-colonial era. The civilian administration of Shahu Shagari failed woefully in addressing the economy set back of the nation. The Economic Stabilization (Temporary Provision) Act of April 1982 aims at reducing government expenditure and imports also failed to ameliorate the oil sector stabilization. This was due to heavenly corrupt politicians and inability of Shagari to wield control over their mass embezzlement. General Muhammad Buhari War against Indiscipline (WAI) was so autocratic that it also failed as it attack on civil liberties and human rights alienated the people. While the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) ushered in by the government of Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida strengthen the demand for management through monetary, fiscal and wage policies to stimulate domestic production by encouraging non-oil exports as well as reducing dependence on imported goods through changes in relative prices.²⁴

From the foregoing, the state of Nigeria was thus characterized by the impact of globalization and the multinational corporations on ethnicity. This impact is tripartite: hostility of an ethnic group toward the government, hostility toward the multinational corporation and hostility toward neighbouring ethnic groups. Underpinning these conflicts is the requirement that governments in Nigeria and elsewhere facilitate the profit-making and transnational activities of the multinational corporations. In Nigeria, this has meant providing abundant land,

ignoring pollution requirements and in general permitting these companies to neglect their social responsibilities to the communities where they operate. All this is often done without consulting the local communities or reaching a consensus with them. This state unilateralism generates opposition among ethnic groups towards the government and the companies. It may also generate conflict of interest on how to share the benefits or burdens of the activities of these foreign companies.²⁵

Exploitation of the Multinational Companies

One of the negative impacts of globalization is its whittling away of the power of the state. It has shifted the balance of power in world economy from territory-based governments to transnational corporations. Hence in Nigeria the state is clearly subordinated to transnational corporations who mine, produce and market oil internationally. Thus, Human Rights Watch found that the people of the oil-producing areas were brutalized by agents of the state for attempting to raise grievances with the oil companies. In some cases, the state security forces threatened, beat and jailed members of community delegations even before they presented their cases. Many local people were repressed simply for putting forth an interpretation of a compensation agreement, or for seeking effective compensation for land ruined, or livelihood lost as a result of the operations of the companies.²⁶

Under these conditions of severe state and company repression coupled with the havoc done to the environmental degradation and means of livelihood of the people, ethnic identity was inevitably crystallized. It became only a matter of time for conflict to emerge between this ethnic nationalism on the one hand and the state and companies on the other. The case of Ogoni is illustrative. The Ogoni ethnic group as previously noted was a minority in population as compare to other groups that inhabit south-eastern Nigeria. Over the last decade they have become a symbol for minority ethnic groups in their struggle for fair and just share of national resources. In the spirit of federal character, the Ogonis have stake a clear, direct and unequivocal claim over the resources produced in Ogoni land. For them it is the only way to justice and equity for themselves and other minorities like them.²⁷

The problem posed by this demand is serious because Ogoni land is one of the major sources of petroleum, the most important revenue earner for the country. The struggle of the Ogonis is symbolic because most of the nation's petroleum is mined in the homelands of small minority groups. It just happens that the Ogonis have articulated these demands most clearly and created the best organization for pursuing them.²⁸

The activities of the multinational companies also generate conflicts among the various ethnic groups in the Niger Delta. Some of these conflicts are the results of divide – and- rule tactics by the State and oil companies. For example, the involvement of the Nigeria army in attacks against Ogoni by other neighbouring ethnic group, the Andoni, during the height of the Ogoni crisis speaks volume. In fact, at that time the Ogoni seemed to be at war with all their neighbours. The attacks were apparently designed to punish the Ogoni for their resistance to the State and oil companies, and to justify a security crackdown against the people.²⁹

However, conflict also emerges over competing ethnic claims over the area from which oil is produced. For example, in September, 1998 in the Ilaje-Esa-Edo local government area of Ondo State, at least fifty persons died and thousands were displaced in armed clashes between Ijaw and Ilaje communities laying competing claims to Apata, an oil rig area located between them. Similarly, starting from March, 1997 violence has continually flashed up in Warri between the Ijaw and Itsekiri over ownership of oil producing land. The 1997 crisis between these two wary parties was precipitated by the relocation of a local government headquarters from Ogbe-Ijaw town, to Ogidigben, an Itsekiri town. Similar local government relocations carried out under Sani Abacha caused violent clashes in other parts of Nigeria, notably the Ife-Modakeke area in Yorubaland.³⁰

As part of Ogoni struggle against the oil companies the youth disrupted the activities of the oil companies in various ways. They take oil workers hostage. For instance, in March 1997 youths captured a barge delivering goods to a Chevron installation. They held the crew of seventy Nigerians and twenty expatriates' hostage for three days demanding jobs on the vessel. They block access to company employees on their way to work; close flow stations for days, even weeks; halt production; occupy oil platforms thereby disrupting oil production; interfere with oil export; and force companies to employ them or to award contracts to them as the case maybe.³¹

Sadly, these violent conflicts between the oil minorities on the one hand and the State and oil companies on the other have persisted. They attained notoriety with the Odi massacre in the year 200 when the State carried out a sadistic massacre against a village in Odi where some policemen had been killed. A more peaceful variety of such conflict is the politics of resource control that pits these minorities against some other parts of the country over ownership and control of the oil wealth of the Niger Delta.³²

To remedy the situation, the Ogoni movement came up with an arrangement by which each ethnic group would have complete control over its natural resources and would only make contributions to the federation for its upkeep. This was such a laudable and critical idea of revenue allocation that the federal government, under the Babangida dictatorship, classified 'MOSOP' as a secessionist organization and did everything possible to crush it. It was within the context of this government hostility and that of Shell Development, the multinational oil corporation that exploits crude oil in Ogoni land, that inter and intra - ethnic conflict and violence ensued between the Ogonis and the State and their neighbours.³³ For example: Umuechem and State 1990; Obagi and the State 1993, 1994; Odi and the State 1999; Soku and Nembe that spread to Sangama, Kula and Opukiri 1992, Eleme, Ogu and Okirika 1999; Ijaw and itsekiri 1997-2003; Ogoni and Andoni in 1993, 1994 and so forth. Most of these conflicts were internecine wars that caused acute destructions and severe constriction of human security that the Niger Delta could aptly be called a "a zone of violence".³³

Although there are no clear statistics on the number of deaths arising from these conflicts, it is commonly acknowledged that these conflicts have resulted in large number of deaths and destruction of properties and in some cases entire communities.³⁴ Nevertheless, discontent had simmered in Ogoni land over the years; it assumed visibility and its present militancy in 1990 when the Ogoni people presented the federal government with the Ogoni Bill of Rights which demanded self -determination and compensation for the pollution of their fishing waters and the contamination of their farmlands. The resulting confrontation with the Babangida dictatorship reached a head in January 1993 when an Ogoni demonstration was met with violence, brutality and arrest by the law enforcement agencies. In reaction, the Ogonis resisted the laying of an oil pipeline in Ogoni land by Shell Development and Willbros, a pipe laying company. The Nigeria army intervened, killing one person and wounding twelve others. Leaders of MOSOP were arrested. The Ogonis decided to boycott the presidential elections of 12th June, 1993.³⁵

The regime of General Sani Abacha continued and intensified this repression of Ogoni people. A River State Internal Security Task Force, a military unit, was created in January 1994 specifically to deal with the Ogoni question. Its brutal repressions in the area, and this resulted in the execution of Ken Saro Wiwa and sixteen others. Despite this glaring hostility it did not deter protest from taking place; the Umuechem protest in 1990 was directed against the State and the oil companies. At Umuechem east of Port Harcourt on 30th and 31st October, 1990 a protest was masterminded in support of the demand of the community for the provision of electricity, water, roads, and other compensations for oil pollution of crops and water supplies. In response on the 31st October, the Mobile Police attacked the peaceful demonstrators with teargas and gunfire. They returned at 5am the next day, shooting indiscriminately in a purported

attempt to locate three of their members who had not returned the previous evening. Some eighty persons were killed and 495 houses destroyed or badly damaged. Although a judicial commission of inquiry into the repression indicted the Mobile Police for “a reckless disregard for lives and property” no compensation has been paid to the victims of the massacre.³⁶

In October, 1992 the Movement for the Survival of the Izon (Ijaw) Ethnic Nationality in the Niger Delta (MOSIEND) emerged to seek the same demand put forward by those of MOSOP. Other similar organizations include the Movement for Reparation to Ogbia (Oloibiri), (MORETO) formed on 1st November 1992, and the Chikoko Movement, formed in August 1997. In December, 1998 some groups of Ijaw Youths gathered from different communities adopted the “Kiama Declaration” that declared all the natural resources within Ijaw land as Ijaw property. It further demanded the withdrawal of all state armed forces for protection. So that on the 1st January, 1999 the Ijaw Youths Council formed at Kiama, launched “Operation Climate Change” a programme of direct action against the pollution of the Niger Delta.³⁷

The recent debate at the National Assembly over Petroleum Industry Bill (PIB) by the General Muhammad Buhari administration is a laudable step towards addressing the inimical problem in the region. A court in Netherland also pronounced that Shell should compensate Ogoni people for the pollution of their land. Hence, the concept of resource control has become legitimized. It can now be discussed publicly, up to the Supreme Court of the land. This has given rise to the fifth and latest phase of ethnic conflict, the phase of provoking ethnic violence as a means of attracting attention to political issues and interest, and of providing political relevance.³⁸

Conclusion

What is happening in the Niger delta is the result of years of iniquity and high handedness. Pushed to the wall, the people of the region have suddenly realized that it is sometimes more honorable to die than to live in slavery. Since the peaceful approach has not yielded significant result, violence has become the favorable language. Failure of Nigeria government to address the reports of various panel set up to look at the existence grievance aggravated the volatile incessant conflicts in the region.

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