

**(JIH) RETRIEVING THE NIGER DELTA CRISES FROM
THE COURT OF NOLLYWOOD**

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Abstract

The crises rocking the Niger Delta region of the current Nigerian State had elicited a great debate that is underlined with an array of opinions, interpretations, viewpoints and logic. The emergence of Nollywood has affected and further exacerbated the debate with great consequences on the social, political and economic space of Nigeria. This paper, therefore, deems it fit to attempt a retrieval of the Niger Delta crises (struggle) from the court of Nollywood. Nollywood in an attempt to tell the story of the Niger Delta crises (struggle), had followed the general trend in the court of public opinion in the current state that situates the entire crises (struggle) as a mere struggle of some disgruntled citizens. The retrieval led the paper to several conclusions. The conclusions did inadvertently lead to the recommendations canvassed herein.

Keywords: Nollywood, Niger Delta, fragility, government and governance, ethnicity.

Introduction

The current Nigerian State is the product of the colonial efforts of the British in the West African sub-region of Africa. The sociological and historical moments of the time made it an imperative for the British to amalgamate the Northern and Southern protectorates. In reinforcing this line of thought, Osadolor (2000) noted that Lugard attempted the idea of amalgamating the two protectorates in 1913. Osadolor (2000) had noted, inter alia, that:

... the decision of Lugard to create a United Nigeria on 1st January 1914 did not result from the pressure of local political groups: it derived from

considerations of administrative convenience as interpreted by a colonial power. Lugard considered it unnecessary to carve up a territory undivided by natural boundaries, more so since one portion (the South) was wealthy enough to commit resources to even “unimportant” programmes while the other portion (the North) could not balance its budget, necessitating the British tax payer being called upon to bear the larger share of even the cost of its administration. This part explains the amalgamation, an act which provoked bitter controversy at the time, arousing the resentment of educated elites and of some British administrators...

The act of amalgamation, according to Osodolor (2000), was not a federal idea as Lugard did not give in on the idea of a federal state for Nigeria initially or from outset. Though there were strong integrative factors (opinion) of inter-group relations prior to the amalgamation, the trends of opinion before 1914 favoured the division of territories into a number of units which could develop into component units of a future federation. But be it as it may, between 1861 and 1914, the different peoples of the current Nigerian state were brought together under British colonial authority as a result of conquest and not as a result of developing the already existing linkages of pre-colonial inter-group relations. In summation, Osadolor (2000) concluded that political exigencies and economic pragmatism necessitated the 1914 amalgamation of the Northern and Southern protectorates to create the modern Nigerian state. The “tortuous journey” into nationhood commenced with little or no efforts at effectively integrating the country socially, politically and economically. The British deliberately left the all pre-existing colonial structures (political, social, and economic) with little alteration that would enhance their exploitation of the country.

At independence in October 1960, the British left the country with hate and discontent. The disposition was a carryover of the British policy of divide and rule. The policy did create the political, social and economic atmosphere of hate amongst Nigerians. For example, the British, in putting their seal of approval on the wrong “notion” of northern region’s population being more than those of eastern and western regions of Nigeria combined, was a seed of discord. This singular policy of the British did pitch the northern region against the rest of the regions, as the policy became the legitimate bases for the northern region to demand 50 per cent of the seats in the federal parliament, and events leading to independence bear testament to this fact. One of the fallouts of this singular policy was the elevation of corruption, ethnicity, maladministration and nepotism over social justice. The political, economic and social conditions and environment bequeathed to Nigerians by the British was a polluted one that was laden with hate, distrust and discontent (Nwaorgu, 2003; Chinweizu, 1978). From independence till date, the Nigerian State has continued in its stride

of repositioning and reinventing itself in relation to her numerous national questions that include the definition of Nigeria and the Niger Delta crises.

The Niger Delta Crises and the Nigerian State

The Niger Delta region of Nigeria is currently bedeviled by several crises that include crisis of human rights abuses, environmental degradation, poverty, hunger, unemployment, militancy, etc. Thus, the question: how did the Nigerian State get to this point? The name *Niger Delta* is both “Geographical and Geological”. Geographically, the area is with rainfall of 4.0mm. Its fresh water alluvial zone is estimated at 2,730sq metres, Saline (mangrove) zone at 2,460sq miles, beach ridge zone 5,556sq miles, Somberero-Warri deltaic plain – 30sq miles and Ogoni exclusive saline soil – 360sq miles. Furthermore, the region covers the following states: Bayelsa, Rivers, Imo, Abia, Cross River, Ondo, Edo, Akwa-Ibom, Delta (Ekpeyong and Dienye, 2010).

As already noted, the British colonialists bequeathed to Nigeria and the early nationalists a nation that was greatly limited in the prerequisites of federalism and democracy. Rather than help the early nationalists in developing the necessary prerequisite of democracy, they (the British) clandestinely introduced the nationalists to their clandestine politics of divide and rule which was anti- people, development, human rights, respect for the rule of law and social justice. The import of the clandestine politics did reconfigure at the operational level of society into the continuous struggle of the Nigerian State in dealing with the several national questions and the cesspool of hate and discontent that littered the Nigerian State. The British policy that had pitched Nigerians against one another was carried over into the post colonial politics through the crude politics bequeathed to early nationalists who, in turn, raised the bar of crude politics. The early nationalists quickly followed through on the clandestine politics by defining the Nigerian State as “mere geographical expression” and “conglomerate of ethnic nationalities”, thus their politicizing and elevating ethnicity. The politicization of ethnicity at the level of society in the current Nigerian State has translated and culminated in the questioning of the corporate existence of the state. This fact is what led to the civil war that started in 1966. At the end of the civil war, were there lessons learnt? Obviously, none!

The Nigerian State and the political elites continue in their crude politics. The same crude politics that robbed the Nigerian State of the required allegiance and patriotism continues unabated. Politics that made it pertinent for the reconstruction of all thoughts and policies that would have elicited effective integration of the country politically, socially and economically. The reconstruction noticed after the civil war till date has continued to increase the cesspool of hate and distrust. The reconstruction of policies and politics in the

current Nigerian State has falsely ascribed the process and abilities of leadership, commerce, education and management to the three majority tribes - Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba.

The minorities in the Nigerian State, by virtue of these redefinitions and crude politics were considered Nigerians and part of Nigeria by reason(s) of what their regions can bring to the “dinner table” of the Nigerian State economically. The experiences of the Niger Delta bears testament to this fact. The reconstruction and crude politics did systematically and steadily push the public consciousness and discontents in minority tribes to the lowest ebb and underground. The fate of the minorities in the Nigerian State caused them to be treated as second class citizens. The areas or region occupied by the minorities became simultaneously known for administrative neglect, human rights abuse, abject poverty and environmental degradation. For the Niger Delta region, the United Nations Human Development Report on Niger Delta (2006), in alluding to this line of thought, posited, *inter alia*:

... in reality, the Niger Delta is a region suffering from administrative neglect, crumbling social infrastructure and services, high unemployment, social deprivation, abject poverty, filth and squalor and endemic conflict... Beyond vast oil and gas deposits, the delta is blessed with good agricultural land, extensive forests, excellent fisheries and a large labour force. But juxtaposed against the potential for economic growth and sustainable development are deteriorating economic and social conditions that have been largely ignored by contemporary policies and actions. With local inhabitants subjected to abject poverty and suffering in the midst of plenty, some view the oil and gas endowments as a curse and a double-edged sword...

Giving flanks to the thoughts of the UNDP (2006) were the thoughts of Johnson (2001) who noted, *inter alia*, that the positioning and situating of the Niger Delta region into fitting the mold and the conditions described in the UNDP (2006) report stemmed from the colonial policies used in the governance of the region. The systematic and administrative neglect of the region, according to Johnson (2001), is intricately woven to colonial policies which the current Nigerian State did inherit. For reasons of crude politics combining with other negative vices like ethnicity, nepotism, corruption, and lack of respect for the rule of law, the repealing of the laws that helped in disempowering the people of the region has been difficult. Some of these laws could be found in the land proclamation No. 8 of 1900, the land and native rights ordinance of 1914, the crown lands amendments ordinance, the land native rights ordinances (amended by ordinance of 1925), the public and acquisition ordinance and the land use decree 1978.

The flanks given to the thoughts of the UNDP (2006) by Johnson (2001) prompted Okowa (2005) to ask a key question which borders on the definition of the Nigerian State. Okowa (2005) had asked:

... So on what basis can one define the Nigerian Nation? We do not have a common religion. Our history is less than a hundred years and it is clearly too short to provide a comfortable basis for the definition a sustainable nationhood... or is it the case that the wealth of the minorities of the Niger Delta has provided a looting basis for the contemporary manifestation and definition of the business called Nigeria? The continuous looting and plundering of the nation's treasury, regime after regime, civil and military, clearly evidences the fact that our leaders do not believe in Nigeria as their nation. One is not saying that they do not believe in Nigeria as a business, of course. It is perhaps the most lucrative business in the world today, for those crooked enough and fortunate enough to capture political power... the fundamental planks that serve as the basis for the definition of the Nigerian Nation is the common interest of all to loot and plunder the oil and gas resources of the peoples of the Niger Delta...

At the operational level of society in the Niger Delta region, the interplay of the “wrong definition of Nigeria”, with the crude politics, ethnicity, nepotism, maladministration and lack of respect for the rule of law did reconfigure into the Nigerian State being seen and considered as a legitimization of corruption over Social Justice. For any nation to be construed as such means that state is anti-development, anti-human rights, anti-sustainable environment and anti-women for reasons of its politics being crude and violent. The attempt at making the Nigerian State to redress the plight of the people of the Niger Delta had always been met by the might of the Nigerian State. The handling of the discontents emanating from the Niger Delta, especially after the killing of Ken Saro Wiwa, did force several groups in the region to take to militancy, thus challenging the corporate existence of the Nigerian State. The following groups were known to have been involved in either the peaceful agitation or militant agitation for the redress of the Nigerian State's abuses:

1. The Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP)
2. The Association of Minority Producing Areas of Rivers State (AMPARS)
3. The Association of Minority Oil States (AMOS)
4. The Ethnic Minority Rights Organization of Nigeria (EMRON)
5. The Ethnic Minority Rights Organization of Africa (EMROAF)
6. The Nigerian Society for the Protection of the Environment (NSOPEN)
7. The Movement for the Reparation of Ogbia and Olobiri

8. The Ijaw Youth Council (IYC)
9. The Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND)
10. The Niger Delta People Volunteer Force (NDPVF)
11. The Congress for the Liberation of Ikwerre People
12. The Chikoko Movement
13. The Egbesu Confraternity
14. The Avengers

The several agitations that litter the region have given the administrators of the current Nigerian State sleepless nights. In the same vein, the agitations had been subjected to several interpretations and arguments and the Nigerian film industry (Nollywood) is not left out.

Retrieving the Niger Delta Crisis from Nollywood

The Niger Delta crisis (struggle) is being situated as having several underlining, perceptions and opinion. Part of the dominant opinion is that the crisis is being perpetuated by a few misdirected youths and elders that have personal grievances against the state. This strand of opinion failed to take into cognizance the crude and violent politics of the state. This type of politics in the Nigeria State has elevated corruption, maladministration, nepotism and ethnicity over social justice. Historically, the Niger Delta crisis has its roots in the Isaac Adaka Boro's revolution. The core theme of the revolution is that all Nigerians should have "same rights under the flag". Simply put, the revolution desired the legitimization of social justice over corruption, etc. The attempt in telling the story of struggle (crisis) as witnessed from 1999 till date by Nollywood had reconfigured to the several shades of opinion and perceptions at the operational level of society in Nigeria. These shades of opinion and perceptions are what had necessitated the retrieval efforts by the paper.

The paper in attempting to retrieve the Niger Delta crisis from the court of Nollywood and array of opinions in the public court commenced its analysis by calibrating the films into genres; thus, the paper, relied on Dede (2005), who had, inter alia, argued that:

... Nigeria's film industry, popularly known as Nollywood, is by far a creation of circumstances. It grew out of its own steam by constantly challenging itself through a process of experimentation and improvisation. Although filmmaking in Nigeria dates back to the colonial era and developed through the post-colonial 70s and 80s, it really could not be recognized as an established industry in the sense of huge-scale finance-generating sector of the mainstream economy...

The efforts of Dede (2005) at understanding the large volume of films meant the categorization of films in Nollywood according to their genre. Dede (2005) warned that the word *genre* is not exclusive to the study of films, but that film genre study is to compile reasonably large body of films based on the common elements. Premised on the common elements of the films, Dede (2005) proceeded to zero in those films that dwelt on the Niger Delta crisis (struggle) in order to effectively retrieve the struggle from the court of Nollywood (Shaka, 2003; Ayakoroma, 2007). From the array of “genre films” gathered, Dede (2005) brought a salient point to bear on this paper by noting that Nollywood did advertently create the “Niger Delta genre films”. These “genre films” examine and told the stories of the Niger Delta crisis from different perceptions and perspectives.

The effort at retrieving the crisis (struggle) meant the examination of the following films: Militants (Niamsa, 2007), Liquid Black Gold (Ikenna Aniekwe, 2008) Amnesty (Aniekwe, 2009) Tears of Oil (Jeta Amata, 2007), The Way We Are (Ifeyanyi Onyeabor, 2008). The common denominator in all of these films is bringing the problems of the Nigerian State to the public court. The opinion of the public court is currently being shaped by the historical and sociological moments, thus the division in opinions and perceptions at the operational level of society in Nigeria. One of the dominant perceptions concerning the Niger Delta crisis is the contextualization of the crisis (struggle) within the context of minority activism, public interest and liberty. Again, it should be noted that the interpretations of the crisis in most cases overlap, as numerous strands (perceptions) are brought together. In other words, there is no explicitness in these interpretations. For example, in the Liquid Black Gold (Ikenna Aniekwe, 2008), there were several themes thrown forth - poverty, unemployment, environmental degradation, human rights abuses, militancy, the definition of the Nigerian State and citizens rights. The theme that concerns the definition of Nigeria did rake up the twin issues of the responsibilities of the state towards its citizens and the duties of the citizens towards the state. Whatever opinion one holds on these subjects and themes, “the shade of grey” underpinning the current Nigerian state is the fact that it is defined along ethnic lines. In other words, the politicization of ethnic issues had translated the elevation of corruption, and nepotism over social justice. Politics of the state is crude and violent. Politics is now for the crooks and a means of gaining access to national treasury. The consequences and interplay of these factors thrown forth by the film (Liquid Black Gold) are that the current Nigerian State as it is constructed lacks the capacity to lift the masses of its population out of pervasive hunger and poverty, thus the state failing in its responsibilities to its citizens. It is against this backdrop that militancy gained energy and impetus in the Niger Delta region. But Dukor (2003) took a swipe at one of the themes thrown up by the film (Liquid Black Gold) which borders on the rights of the minority. Dukor (2003) had argued that:

... the ascription of natural rights to the oil communities is a reasoning in the state of nature without civil societies, an argument which is out of context with the present dispensation. Much as natural rights may exist in a society without government, that is where might is right, the natural rights of a moral man... the rights which the oil communities claim, therefore, seem to be primitive natural rights of primitive humanity...

While Dukor (2003) gave evidence against itself by “double talking” the snag in his analysis is the fact that he considers Nigeria an ideal state. The question to Dukor (2003) is: which ideal state defines a section of its citizens as second class, exploits their resources, destroys their environment, militarizes their region, denies them their human rights, and suffers from pre-judicial killings without expecting an uproar? Since the current Nigerian State is not an ideal state, the logic and arguments of Dukor (2003) become unsustainable. These are the narrations the Niger Delta film genre had brought forth by telling the Niger Delta story. All of these films did retrieve the Niger Delta struggle (crisis) from the dominant opinion and perception that the struggle was being perpetuated by few disgruntled elements.

Conclusion

The Niger Delta films genre did tell the Niger Delta story but, in the same vein, did bring the problems of the Nigerian State to the fore. At the heart of Nigeria’s problem is the patriotism and unity of all the sections of the country. The elevation of ethnicity, corruption, nepotism and judicial rascality over social justice gave impetus and energy to the struggle (crisis). The retrieval efforts of Dede (2005) did cause him to situate the entire struggle within the purview of ethnic nationalism – the desire of a group (ethnic group) to be legitimately considered as Nigerians.

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