

THE NIGER DELTA STRUGGLE: RESPONSIBILITY BECKONS.

A LECTURE DELIVERED
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AT THE OCCASION OF THE COMMEMORATIVE CELEBRATION OF "BORO DAY" BY
THE IJAW NATIONAL ALLIANCE OF THE AMERICAS AT THE SHERATON HOTEL,
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1: PREAMBLE:

When I was contacted by my big brother Dr. Matthew Sikpi, about two months ago to participate as a discussant in this year's commemoration of Isaac Boro Day by the Ijaw National Alliance of the Americas, my initial reaction was to make a legitimate excuse citing my crowded schedule. But when it occurred to me that this occasion would also present an opportunity for me to reflect on the plight of the Ijaw Nation, from my limited view point, particularly as it is affected by the inherent forces and activities which shape and define the struggle in the Niger Delta Region, I had to make quick adjustments.

Furthermore, recognizing that this could also be a unique opportunity for me to share my views with the brethren in the diaspora, in light of my experiences and perceptions as an Ijaw man who had been privileged to participate in various sectors of national endeavours, as well as exposure at all the levels of governance in the country, it was clear to me that I had no other choice, but to share this moment of self-assessment and introspection with you.

Nevertheless, from the outset, I wish to sound a note of caution. By my training and professional orientation, most of you may be disappointed in the lack of socio-political depth in my assessment of such a profoundly broad subject matter with deep and far reaching implications.. My contribution to this discussion will therefore be mainly arousal in intent; directed primarily at asking a lot of pertinent questions which I believe would elicit a robust debate amongst us. I crave your indulgence to hone your instincts so that we all can enrich and enliven the discussion.

2. EXCERPTS FROM THE JOURNAL OF AN IJAW VILLAGE BOY:

Whenever I am opportuned to share some thoughts on our plight with my brethren, I could not but share, though with a feeling of despondency, excerpts from the journal of an Ijaw village boy. It is pertinent, because they

express the feelings, expectation and disappointments of an Ijaw village boy. It is crucial because it captures the very essence of his Ijawness.

“As a young Ijaw boy growing up in the village in the sixties, I still recollect with nostalgia, the first political attribute of the Ijaws, which I learnt with pride. It was that the Ijaws are the fourth largest “tribe” in Nigeria. I was also told, and I listened with satisfaction that, when the European adventurers and traders arrived Ijawland in the late fifteenth century, the Warrior Kings of The Ijaw city-states defended their resources and territories through formal treaties and other appropriate means. Then sometime down the road, the news translation in nine indigenous languages from Radio Nigeria was also read in Ijaw. My head expanded a little more. However, these positive feelings in me were to be short-lived when the Nigeria Civil War broke out.

At the time, I was too young to know what the war was all about, but I could recollect that many of our villages were either occupied or burnt down by Biafran soldiers, and our fathers and uncles taken away into captivity in mass detention centres, where they were denied the basic essence of humanity, and in some cases, killed outright. These negative experiences evoked yet another feeling in me about the Ijaws, and I couldn't help but ask the question: Are the Ijaws a bunch of spineless, weak, lazy and cowardly group of persons that can easily be hounded and dehumanized by other groups.

I was in this state of shock, despair and confusion, when the liberating Federal soldiers of the famous “Third Marine Commandoes” arrived in our communities. Incidentally, our hero, Isaac Adaka Boro was an inspirational leader in this regiment, and majority of the soldiers in it were Ijaws and my head was thrown into a higher state of confusion in trying to unravel the true attributes and character of the Ijaw man”.

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen, even as I speak to you today, just like the predicament of the village Ijaw boy, nearly forty-nine years after Nigeria's independence, I am still at a loss to properly characterize and situate the position of the Ijaw ethnic nationality in Nigeria. But then I have just realized, that is the main essence of our gathering here.

3. THE NIGER DELTA AND THE IJAWS:

The Ijaws inhabit the vast wetlands of the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. They are principally fishermen and sea-faring people. They have settled in the region for over several thousand years, and their settlements are located mainly along the banks of the rivers and estuaries. They remember no other homeland. They have completely identified with the environment and developed a culture fully attuned to it. In the present day political

configuration, the Ijaws are found in the following states: Akwa Ibom, Rivers, Bayelsa, Delta, Edo and Ondo. Their total population estimate based on the 2006 national census and other standard demographic parameters, is put at over twelve million.

Because the Ijaws are spread all around the Niger Delta, and since they constitute the largest ethnic group that inhabit the Niger Delta, any meaningful discussion of the Ijaws is virtually synonymous with that of the Niger Delta.

It is important to note that, the meaning of the entity, Niger Delta itself, has been somewhat mystified in recent times. This is because it has been configured to have several meanings depending on the interests of the user. Thus, to some Nigerian hegemonists and political jobbers, it only has a political meaning; to the transnational capitalist, it has an economic portrayal; and to others it is a geographical expression. Here again, to me as a Niger Deltan, it is a geographical entity with physical, sociological and economic attributes, characterized by peculiar developmental problems which are accentuated by the very difficult terrain.

The Niger Delta extends over an area of about 70,000 square kilometres and accounts for 7.5% of Nigeria's land mass. It is the world's third largest wetland. The Niger Delta is a region of Nigeria defined by the triangular land area traversed by the point of bifurcation of the River Niger into the Nun and Forcados Rivers and its many other distributaries into the Atlantic Ocean. Delineation of the actual area with specificity is an issue that has engendered serious controversy.

Thus, from the view point of a layman, the Niger Delta can be loosely defined as follows: Along the Nigerian coastline (the base of the triangle) from the east, it spans from the western parts of Akwa-Ibom State to the eastern parts of Ondo State. Its northern tip, the upper vertex of the triangle, lies somewhere in the southern parts of Anambra State, along the lower River Niger, where it divides into the Nun and Forcados Rivers. The Ijaws are therefore bounded by the large Nigerian ethnic nations of the Yoruba on the west, the Edo to the north-west, Igbo to the north-east, and the Ibibio to the east.

The natural difficult terrain and the low population density of the inhabitants of the Niger Delta place certain limitations on their social and economic activities. Thus, the dilemma the Ijaws, nay the people of the Niger Delta face can be summed up as follows:

- i. Habitation of a very difficult terrain, which poses a lot of developmental constraints, as huge amounts of money are required for physical infrastructural development.
- ii. The linear configuration of many settlements along the riverbanks also presents significant constraints in the planning of centralized developmental activities
- iii. Coercively being dispossessed of their natural resources by the federal government.
- iv. Watching over the depletion and exploitation of their natural resources as mere spectators.
- v. Facing the unsavoury consequences of environmental degradation arising from mineral exploration and exploitation without the possibility of mitigation and protection; with the added threat to public health and global warming.
- vi. Emasculation of their main economic activities of fishing and farming by the destruction of the habitats in their rivers and creeks, and farmlands due to pollution arising from oil exploration and extraction activities.

4. THE NIGER DELTA STRUGGLE AND THE IJAW NATION.

Every society is inherently dynamic in nature. Thus, the political strategy and tactics for managing the Niger Delta Struggle must reflect adherence to core interests, underscored by a flexible and proactive implementation plan, which must be continually attuned to the realities of the changing times.

Struggling with the need to reduce the likelihood that inferences and deductions made here may be misconstrued to be somewhat uncharitable to us as a people, and recognizing the fact also, that we owe ourselves the responsibility of unflattering self-examination with some degree of refined candor, we may need to take a cursory look into the past and present political history of the Ijaws. Such an unbiased appraisal reveals the following observations:

4.1 **Inertia in Confronting Our Developmental Problems:**

The peculiar developmental needs and problems of the Ijaw nation (the Niger Delta) have been identified and attempts made to address them since the recommendations of Willink's Commission of 1957, which predates Nigeria's independence. This led to the establishment of the Niger Delta Development Board in the first republic.

There has since been a plethora of endless feasibility studies, including all the plans and recommendations drawn up by NEDECO of the Netherlands.

We have also moved past the era of OMPADEC; planning! In year 2005, the various governments and special federal government agencies such as NDDC were still identifying these needs, prescribing methods and devising plans to solve them. This begs the question: when will the actual implementation commence? Can there be a possible coordination of these development plans, so as to minimize the precious time and resources spent on continuously replicating this critical phase? Let us hope and believe that the Ledum Mitte led Committee report which has taken into proper perspective the recommendations in most of the earlier reports is implemented by the Federal Government.

4.2 Evolving a Strategy for Effective Participation:

We as a people have shouted ourselves hoarse in vociferously stating the point that we have been shut out of participation in the oil and gas industry, which is domiciled in our land. There is no doubt we have been treated unfairly. In a multiethnic country like ours with its attendant inter-ethnic rivalry, and very weak institutions, which tend to enthrone inequity than dispensing justice and equity, this is expected. However, for us Ijaws, it has been observed that there appears to be the lack of an home-grown and enduring developmental strategy which should seek to position Ijaws to:

- ✚ enhance our competitiveness in educational and professional preparedness to participate fully in the workforce and business opportunities offered by the multinationals dominated petroleum industry.
- ✚ fully integrate into the economic mainstream of the country so as to acquire the financial muscle to meaningfully and profitably participate in the exploitation of our natural resources.

4.3 The Nexus between Resource Control and Resource Management

The injustice engendered by the selective application of the derivation principle in the sharing of the federally distributable revenue has created a wellspring of discontent. One of the major planks of agitation of the Ijaws since oil was first struck in Oloibiri in commercial quantities in 1956 is the issue of revenue allocation, which has currently metamorphosed into resource control. This dissatisfaction is succinctly captured in the Kaiama Declaration of the Ijaw Youths Council, and other similar documents from other ethnic nationalities in the Niger Delta like the Ogoni Bill of Rights, etc.

That the principle of Derivation in Revenue Allocation has been consciously and systematically obliterated by successive regimes of the Nigerian state is evident from the following table, which shows its trend over the last 50 years.

1953 (Chicks Constitution)	100%
1960 (Independence Constitution)	50%
1970 (Gowon)	45%
1975 (Murtala/Obasanjo)	20%
1982 (Shagari)	2%
1984 (Buhari)	1.5%
1992 (Babangida)	3%
1999(Fourth Republic Constitution)	13%

As we all know, the 13% principle is currently being implemented under the 1999 Constitution. Furthermore, its worthy of note that more funds are being provided for the development of the Niger Delta under the NDDC Act. The recent abrogation of the Offshore/Onshore Dichotomy also has the concomitant effect of making more resources available to the affected states. And most recently, the creation of the Niger Delta Ministry, if properly applied, could also serve as an additional palliative for channeling resources for the development of the area.

Granted, this does not in any way approximate a fair and equitable sharing of resources, but it is obviously a fairly sizeable harvest; isn't it? I am an apostle of resource control and I believe in the basic tenets espoused in the Kaiama Declaration and the Kari-Oca Village Declaration, however, we as Ijaws need to confront some sad but incontrovertible facts. The fundamental issue we need to examine is the extent of proper utilization of these resources, which though not sufficient, have been available to us in the past, and with significant enhance at the present time.

We may wish to note that, in the current political dispensation, which has lasted about a decade, there appears to be a consistent pattern of near absence of optimal management of the resources that have been statutorily allocated to the constituent Ijaw states and local government areas. Can such a scenario of non performance be justified under any guise? Can the concept of efficient and effective resource management be divorced from resource control? Off course, the obvious answer is no. The two are inseparable Siamese twins and must go together.

From the available facts for the past ten years of the new democratic dispensation, it can be stated with some degree of fairness that, these increased dividends have not positively impacted on the lives of the people of the area. The increased revenues at the state and local council levels have not meaningfully impacted on the positive development of the area and the wellbeing of the people. Simply put, these resources have not been allowed to percolate down to improve the lives of the ordinary people of the area at the grassroots.

Going by the current trend, if the situation is not properly addressed and remedied, it could very well be that soon, ***our elected political leaders at the state and local government levels may lose the moral authority to lead on matters of resource control and management in the Niger Delta.*** The people of the Niger Delta have always rightly identified and known the oppressor to be from without in the past. ***A pattern is evolving now that gives credence to the assertion that a more pervasive and versatile conqueror, in the mold of imposed political office holders,*** has evolved from within. This appears to be negating the successes achieved by the positive agitations of our elders and past leaders from the area. There are now a few states in the region. More funds are available. Could there be a larger problem within?

4.4. Agitation and Youths Restiveness

Most conflicts in human history are centred on the scramble for the control of natural resources and the attendant struggle for political power for the domination of the human societies. Where the rules of engagement are not equitable, and not properly and fairly defined, the majority (stronger) groups usually oppress the minority and/or weaker elements in the society. In situations where the dominant groups blatantly fail to accommodate the interests and aspirations of the minority groups, the oppressed groups may adopt unconventional methods and tactics of agitation, at times bordering on violence, for self-expression, self-actualization and survival.

This is already part of the Nigerian experience, particularly in the Niger Delta. The “Twelve Day Rebellion” of the Niger Delta Volunteer Forces led by Isaac Jasper Boro in 1966 is a case in point. The initial massive and passionate support enjoyed by Asari Dokubo among the Ijaw Youths in his resuscitation of the Niger Delta Volunteer Force nearly four decades later was a clear testimony that the simmering discontent continues to heat up.

Nevertheless, inspite of the calculated slow response, or lack of desire on the part of the Nigerian polity to properly understand the problems of the Niger Delta Region, the vision, nature and character of the struggle must remain

noble and focused; devoid of criminal inclinations, which can easily be exploited to discredit a rather legitimate, noble and just course. The current happenings in the Ijaw areas of the Niger Delta, where whole towns and villages have been annihilated by military action is feeding on these disparate tendencies.

The seeming lack of a properly defined strategy and articulated set of rules of engagement has also created an opportunity for the emergence of various youth groups, who in some cases also have their specific scripts to play. Nevertheless, it is very well understood that the youths are the custodians of our future, and major stakeholders in the face of inaction, particularly from within. Consequently, the leadership of the Ijaw National Congress has a major role to play in constructively engaging the youths to properly channel our energies and intellect.

With the added oil revenues, state governments must put in place sustainable development programmes, which must have an appropriate admixture of physical and human development. Particularly, there must be a commitment to the empowerment of the youths, through proper education. This is because a virile, upwardly mobile professional and satisfied youth makes for social stability and societal progress. In this direction, it could be suggested that state and local governments should:

- i. intensify the implementation of effective technical education programmes aimed at imparting good professional skills in our youths to make them employable and self-reliant.
- ii. creatively enforce all existing Federal Government Statutes, which makes it mandatory for agencies and companies operating in the States to employ the youths. This is particularly relevant in the oil companies.
- iii. establish agro-based cottage industries in the rural areas.
- iv. adequately coordinate and enhance the operation of the various school to land programmes, and provide incentives to encourage young farmers.
- v. introduce and strengthen moral instruction in schools to stimulate proper social orientation in youths, and respect for our traditional value system.
- vi. improve sporting facilities in order to encourage our youths towards realizing their full potentials in various sports, amongst others.

Even though, it may take longer than we would expect to resolve, the issues of equitable and fair distribution of the national resources, taking into proper consideration, regional peculiarities as well as national stability and survival will come to pass. However, the current trend of events portends danger for the Ijaws if we don't look inward. Our communities are becoming populated more with youths who have lost the appetite for a functional education. This is

occasioned by the negative incentives created by politicians who would rather have them become perpetual armed political thugs instead of strengthening the educational institutions which can uplift them and our society. Furthermore, we have also misread the true meaning of militancy to approximate it with the use of brute force, which more often than not, could be misapplied without the requisite intellectual component. As is the current experience, this will always create *suitable conditions* for the Government to deploy its instruments of coercion, by resorting to use of force.

Another very serious dimension to the reduced interest in acquiring good education is the lack of competitiveness of our youths to grapple with the realities of the modern global economy which is technology intensive and characterized by a labour force which is skills-driven. There has to be a massive and directed re-orientation of our value system to recognize that growth of the community and the upliftment of the standard of living of the communities is the collective of the individual contributions of its productive members. Can we truly and peacefully sustain and implement a developmental strategy, if a large fraction of our youths are not educationally prepared to participate in it?

5. RE-ENGINEERING THE STRATEGY OF THE NIGER DELTA STRUGGLE: THE ROLE OF THE INC:

It is the wish of every well-meaning Nigerian that our new-found democracy has come to take root. It is also the expectation that the opportunities offered by on-going political reforms and policy refinements will be optimally exploited to enthrone an enduring democratic culture whose foundation will be rooted in justice, fairness and equity. My brethren, occasions like this summit organized by INAA with the unique theme, "The Niger Delta Question: The Imperative for Self Introspection" offers an opportunity for a rethink on how best we can position the Ijaw nation to creatively take advantage of these structural changes at home. Luckily, the top leadership of the Ijaw National Congress is present in this conference, and the many other distinguished Ijaw sons and daughters are participating as delegates representing their respective states and zones. Something seems to be changing! And are we braced up for the emerging political dynamics?

The young village boy grew up ever proud as an Ijaw boy. The failure of his people to seize the appropriate moments to act decisively created an indelible impression of lack of focus of his people in him. Now, he is an adult and still observes that the isolated and un-coordinated struggles of the Ijaws have been quite sporadic with very limited success, and in some cases, bothering on group

suicide. He believes, responsibility is beckoning on us, and that the INC can and should provide the rudder and compass to purposefully navigate the ship of the Ijaw nation.

5.1 The INC as an Instrument for Societal Progress:

To perform the role of an agent for social change creditably, the INC must be seen as a catalyst, which will stimulate growth and development within its constituent states. This can be achieved through structured continuous dialogue and constructive engagement with the relevant governments. However, the basis for the engagement must have as verifiable parameters, a continuous periodic assessment of the requisite social indicators of well-being of the people; namely:

- ✚ standard of education and literacy rates
- ✚ average life expectancy
- ✚ health care facilities measured by number of hospitals (secondary and referral), number of doctors and bed-space
- ✚ capacity of centralized electricity generation
- ✚ business activities such as cottage industries, SMEs, etc.
- ✚ length of motorable road network and navigable water-ways
- ✚ per capita income, etc., etc.

With the understanding that there are very limited resources available for the development of the Ijaws, one may not expect to see a quantum leap in the afore-mentioned parameters over a short period of time, but there should be a noticeable positive trend. The question is: Is the developmental progress we claim to be making commensurate with the resources expended, particularly in the last ten years of the current democratic dispensation?

5.2 Enthronement of an Accountable and Purposeful Political Leadership:

We as a people have always and rightly placed our marginalization and underdevelopment on the oppressive distortions in the Nigerian State. Somehow we may be losing the moral ground to complain in the face of the colossal misapplication and mismanagement of the resources meant for the development in our states and local council areas. The blame for lack of performance can be squarely situated in the political leadership.

Does the INC have a role to play in preventing buccaneers from capturing and hijacking the political process for their selfish purposes? Can the INC play a

pivotal role in the evolution and enthronement of purposeful governance based on the true tenets of democracy?

There should be some measure of internal consistency within the framework of democratic ethos for the enthronement of good governance in Ijawland. Its about time we look inward to put our house in order. However, in seeking to stimulate political re-orientation in the pursuance of its mandate and responsibilities to the people, the INC must not be seen to subjugate itself to any state government, lest it becomes a mere appendage of a government.

5.3 Maintaining the Peace and Seeking Worthy Political Partners

The major events which have significantly transformed the political configuration of the Ijaws have been orchestrated from outside. The creation of the old Rivers State by Yakubu Gowon in 1967 and the creation of Bayelsa State by Sani Abacha in 1996 are probably the two most important political actions, which have bestowed on the Ijaws some dose of dignity and relevance in the Nigerian Polity.

This, by no means, is an expression of satisfaction with the status quo ante, but an appropriate recognition of the fact that in the re-engineering the strategy of the Niger Delta Struggle, worthy and trusted partners can be found from far and near. Seeking and maintaining mutual peaceful co-existence with the many other ethnic nationalities who cohabit the Niger Delta region with us will probably be the precursor and master-stroke for an enduring political partnership with our neighbours. The Ijaws should rise up to the occasion to claim and take their rightful position.

6. ENDING NOTES:

Your Excellencies, esteemed leaders of the Ijaw nation, distinguished ladies and gentlemen, I have taken the past thirty minutes or so, to share with you my thoughts about the place of the Ijaws in the Nigerian State and the need to reappraise our strategy in the execution of the Niger Delta Struggle. We must accept as a people, a larger responsibility to fine-tune the strategy, ensuring that the integrity, progress and survival of the Ijaws must not be compromised, while recognizing that, we also have a major role to play in stabilizing our dear country, Nigeria.

In my presentation, I have raised more questions than providing answers, and that is the essence of introspection. I believe, if I was privileged to simply read one of the many lectures prepared by great Ijaw leaders such as the late Chief

Harold Dappa-Biriye, late Chief Melford Okilo, or Chief Edwin Clarke, delivered some forty years ago, the issues and content may not have been very different. This suggests that there appears to be some stagnation. We have to move a bit faster. The INC is the engine of this movement. The gradual emergence of a directional change to rethink our strategy is therefore quite apt, an added impetus to this drive, and it is my hope that it will erase once and for all the confusion of the Ijaw village boy who is now an adult.

As recorded by Prof. E. J. Alagoa, the foremost Ijaw Historian, the band worn by Isaac Jasper Boro during his "Twelve Day Revolution" for the establishment of a Niger Delta Republic was quite symbolic. It was blazoned with a star, a crocodile, and a lion. The Ijaws are a people identified by a history of heroic struggle, and there can only be hope for the future. A people of courage like the lion, adaptable to land and water like the crocodile, can only strive for the stars. These positive attributes we must optimally harness in defining a new strategy of engagement in the Niger Delta struggle. Our destiny is in our hands, but it must be managed with utmost care and the highest sense of responsibility.

Thank you and God bless.

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