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THE IJAWS AND THE NIGER DELTA:

THE

CHALLENGE OF LEADERSHIP

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INTRODUCTION

This Niger Delta region of Nigeria is an odd paradox in many respects¹. Whereas the geographical terrain is difficult and inhospitable, the area is blessed with numerous resources including Nigeria's oil wealth; which accounts for about 90% of national revenue. Equally, in spite of its abundant resources, the region represents one of the extreme situations of poverty and underdevelopment².

Again, the drive by the people to be integrated into the oil economy/wealth has created widespread conflicts and violence, which undermine development. The struggle for self-determination and resource control has equally suffered setbacks due to the leadership question. Significantly, this has developed all the ethnic nationalities of the Niger Delta. Given the centrality of leadership in the success of group objective, I have, as a deliberate choice, decided to focus my presentation on the Ijaw leadership and the Niger Delta struggle. I will proceed with a discussion of the Niger Delta.

The Niger Delta

The Niger Delta is one of the world's largest wetlands, and Africa's largest delta covering some 70, 000km^{2,3}. The precise boundaries and by extension the component units of the area has become a matter of controversy. The dominant view supports the position of the Willinks Commission⁴ Report which locates the Niger Delta within the Ibo plateau and the cross valley. In its description, the Report notes that:

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To the east of Ibo plateau lies the valley of Cross River, which is fed by stream from the Cameroun's as well as from the plateau. This forms a broad vertical strip containing people who are not Ibos. Across the south of the region from the Niger is the west to the mountains in the east, stretches a broad horizontal belt of swamps and low-lying country. These two strips of the coastal valley together make a rather sprawling reversal 'L' which encloses the Ibo plateau.⁵

In this context, the Niger Delta States include Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Delta and Rivers States. This has widened to include Cross River, Edo, Abia, Imo and Ondo States, for a number of reasons. First is the creation of states, local governments and boundary adjustment, which for instance, carved out Akwa Ibom from Cross Rivers State, and Delta from Edo State.

The second factor is the languages of the different group that make up the region. The Niger Delta Environmental Survey (NDES) notes in this regard that:

...the Niger Delta people are identified under five major linguistic groups – the Ijo, the Yoruba, the Edo, the Igbo and the Delta – Cross. Each of the categories embraces a large number of ethnic/linguistic communities most of which extend beyond the boundaries of the Niger Delta⁶.

The above reference demonstrates the fact that the languages spoken by the Niger Delta ethnic nationalities are equally spoken by non-Niger Delta groups. This probably explains the claim by such groups as being part of the Niger Delta.

The third issue is the fact that the River Niger which largely defines the Niger Delta is linked to and enlarged by rivers other than the tributaries of the Niger Delta – Calabar

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River, Cross River, and Imo River to the east, and Siluku River, Benin River, Escravos River and River Forcados, to the West⁷.

The fourth factor is the politics of oil (the drive to share in the oil wealth), which describes as or includes every oil-producing area in the Niger Delta. In all however, the widespread view sees the politics of oil as the most important factor, which defines the expanding scope of the Niger Delta. It is significant to note that the areas described as components of the Niger Delta (Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Delta, Rivers States) by the Willinks Commission are generally seen as the core Niger Delta. This paper defines the Niger Delta to include these states, Cross River and Edo States. Effectively therefore, the Niger Delta is the south-south geopolitical zone of Nigeria.

The Niger Delta is inhabited by over 7 million Nigerians, 20 ethnic groups, and 800 communities.⁸ The literature on the Delta show that the Ijaw ethnic nationality is the oldest. Thus according to E. J. Alagoa:

...the communities have been settled in the area for over several millennia, especially the Ijaws who are the oldest group in the Delta. From studies of their language, it appears they have been in the Delta for close to between 7 – 10, 000 years, and other groups who have been about 1, 000 years.⁹

This is indeed significant; and it clearly highlights the relevance of our gathering, given the disadvantaged position of Ijaw in the Niger Delta and Nigeria.

The Ijaw Ethnic Nationality

The literature on Ijaw show that its original name was Ojo, later corrupted to Ijo, Izon, and anglicized Ijaw.¹⁰ The accounts of the history of migration is sharply divided. A school of thought posits that the Ijaws migrated into the Niger Delta. Another view insists that the Ijaws are indigenous to the Niger Delta, and that they rather migrated out of the Niger Delta.

The first view contend that the Ijaws moved out of the Yoruba, the Edo and the Igbo, and settled in the Niger Delta. The Niger Delta Environmental Survey, for instance, shares this view when it reported that:

...the Ijo comprise complex single group of settlers in the Niger Delta, estimated to have separated from the Yoruba, the Edo, and the Igbo, and moved into the Niger Delta over 7, 000 years ago.¹¹

Writing on Ijaw history, E. J. Alagoa declared that:

Ijo oral traditions do not point to any place outside the Niger Delta as an ancestral home. The Ijo no longer remember any outside place of origin. The reference to Benin in many Ibo traditions cannot amount to the creation of the Ijo peoples of the Niger Delta from the Edo... Ijo traditions... give no support to the theories, which postulate a massive influx of migrants from the Ibo hinterland, and from other parts of the mainland... Ijo traditions tell of migrations out of the delta into a belt of small ethnic groups separating the Ijo from the major groups to the north, the Ibo, the Edo and Yoruba.¹²

Alagoa's views are not only different from that of the NDES, but also contradicts the position of S. K. Owonaro, who specifically locates Ile Ife as the ancestral home of the

Ijaws. His account is that the father of the Ijaws settled at Igbedi, in present-day Bayelsa between 1040 – 1050 AD; his children dispersed to create the many Ijaw clans.¹³

In between these two extreme views however, the consensus is that the Niger Delta is the home of the Ijaws E. J. Alagoa¹⁴ has grouped the Ijaws of the Niger Delta this way.

(a) Western Delta Fringe

- (1) Apoi
- (2) Arogbo
- (3) Furupagha
- (4) Olodiana
- (5) Gbaramatu
- (6) Ogbo

(b) Western Delta

- (1) Obotebe
- (2) Mein
- (3) Seimibiri
- (4) Tuomo
- (5) Takakiri
- (6) Kabowei
- (7) Kumbowei
- (8) Operemo
- (9) Oyakiri
- (10) Ogulagha
- (11) Iduwini

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(c) Central Delta

- (1) Apoi
- (2) Basan
- (3) Olodiana
- (4) Oporoma
- (5) Ogboin
- (6) Tungbo
- (7) Kolokuma
- (8) Opokuma
- (9) Gbaran
- (10) Zarama
- (11) Okodia
- (12) Biseni
- (13) Ekpetiama
- (14) Tarakiri
- (15) Boma
- (16) Akasa

(d) Eastern Delta

- (1) Nembe
- (2) Kalabari
- (3) Okrika
- (4) Ibani

(e) Eastern Delta Fringe

- (1) Nkoro
- (2) Opobo

- (f) Northern Delta Fringe
 - (1) Epie-Atissa
 - (2) Ogbia
 - (3) Oruma

Following Alagoa, the Ijaw nation is made of 43 clans. Presently, the Ijaws, widely acclaimed to be the fourth largest ethnic group in Nigeria, are scattered in 6 States of the country – Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Delta, Edo, Ondo and Rivers State.

The Ijaws and the Niger Delta Struggle

The context of the Niger Delta struggle is defined by the Nigerian national question. The national question is simply a basket, full of problems and contradictory realities that threaten the basis of our existence as a nation. Its components range from the paradox of underdevelopment in the face of all the numerous resources and potentials, revenue allocation, political instability, ethnic based political domination, etc.

In all however, ethnic domination stands out as the most fundamental component.

Thus according to Ben Naanen:

A critical aspect of the national question is the problem of ethnic domination. A broad section of Nigerian society seems profoundly dissatisfied with the country's political and administrative structure, and generally, the way it has been governed.¹⁵

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In the Niger Delta ethnic based political domination has created and deepened poverty and underdevelopment; by excluding the people from the oil wealth. The Nigerian state is weak and dependent; accordingly, it is privatized and ethnicised to the advantage of the major ethnic groups who control the state. Through legislation, the State has appropriated the oil and gas resources to itself, and then manipulated the resource distributive mechanism to the disadvantage of the Niger Delta people.

A major instrument used in this regard is the manipulation of the principle of derivation, which was revised downward by successive governments. At independence in 1960, revenue allocation was based on derivation, and this was put at 50%. Accordingly, section 134 and 140, sub-sections 1 of the 1960 and 1963 constitutions provided that:

...there shall be paid by the Federation to each region (now State) a sum equal to 50 percent... the proceeds of any royalty received by the federation in respect of any minerals extracted in that region, and any mining rents derived by the federation during that year from that region.

Given that the resource base of the country lied in the homelands of the ethnic majorities, these provisions were upheld. With the ascendancy of oil as the pivot of the nation's economy, and the political impotence of the Niger Delta where the oil is found, the derivation share of revenue allocation was reduced. Any analyst sums it thus:

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...in 1970, the Yakubu Gowon Government reduced it from 50 to 45 percent. This was later slashed down to 20 percent in 1975 by the Murtala/Obasanjo regime. In 1982, the Shehu Shagari administration further slashed it down to 2 percent; and later 1.5 percent by the Buhari/Idiagbon government in 1984. The figure was later raised to 3 percent by Ibrahim Babangida regime. At the moment, it stands at 13 percent...16

With this, the oil revenue is transferred out of the Niger Delta; thus the region is denied development funds. This is made worse by a combination of factors. First, is the enabling law governing the oil industry (Petroleum Act of 1969, Land Use Act of 1978, etc). These laws exclude the people from the oil wealth to the extent that they are denied the right to negotiate for the payment of their properties destroyed by oil industry activities. The laws have spelt out rates, which do not reflect market realities. The people are thus underpaid and this adds to the problems of de-empowerment.

Second is the factor of corruption at all levels of governance. With corruption, only a minute fraction of funds allocated for development objectives trickle down to the target group. Thus problems of underdevelopment remain unresolved. The third issue is oil-based environmental degradation that constrains the socio-economic development of the people. And finally, the harsh geographical terrain, which makes development expensive.

The reality of underdevelopment set in the struggle to be integrated in the oil economic/wealth. This struggle has experienced different phases. According to Lemmy Owugha:

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...We can identify four phases, using the dominant strategy in each phase as a basis. The demands in the first three phases essentially focused on compensation for damages, provisions of certain basic facilities (water, schools, roads, etc.) scholarship and employment. The current phase, which is the fourth, marks a drastic departure from the previous ones; its focus is a total control of the resources...¹⁷

The struggle for resource control and self-determination is thus the struggle we are looking at. Essentially, it is a drive to revise the practice of federalism in Nigeria, to put the control and ownership of oil/gas resources in the hands of the people, as against the present practice where the federal government owns and controls the oil/gas resources.

The stage was set by the Ogonis with the popular Ogoni Bill of Rights (1990). Part of its demands read:

...that the Ogoni people be granted POLITICAL AUTONOMY to participate in the affairs of the Republic as a distinct and separate unit...

...the right to control and use of OGONI economic resources for Ogoni development.¹⁸

It is significant to note in this regard that Adaka Boro and his Niger Delta Volunteer Force had in 1966 taken steps to end the oppression suffered in the hands of Nigeria by the Ijaw man. Adaka Boro declared:

...Today is a great day,... in the history of the Niger Delta. This is not because we are going to bring heavens down, but because we are going to demonstrate to the world what and how we feel about oppression.¹⁹

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The events, which followed, are widely referred to as the 12-day revolution. Following the Ogoni example therefore, the Ijaws set out to reactivate the unfinished Adaka Boro revolution. Thus, on the 11th of December 1998, Ijaw youths held a conference at Kaiama and came out with resolutions, known as the Kaiama Declaration. Part of the resolutions read thus

All land and natural resources (including mineral resources) within the Ijaw territory belong to the Ijaw communities and are the basis of our survival.

We cease to recognize all undemocratic Decrees that rob our peoples/communities of the right to ownership and control of our lives and resources, which were enacted without our participation and consent. These include the Land Use Decree, The Petroleum Decree (Act), etc.

We demand the immediate withdrawal from Ijawland of all military forces of occupation and repression by the Nigerian State.

Ijaw youths in all... Ijaw clans in the Niger Delta will take steps to implement these resolutions... as a step towards reclaiming the control of our lives.²⁰

In all, the Kaiama Declaration demands for the Ijaws, “Self government and resource control” within a “new” Nigeria. The events, which followed the Kaiama Declaration set in motion, the current struggle of the Ijaws and the Niger Delta.

LEADERSHIP AND THE NIGER DELTA STRUGGLE: THE PLACE OF THE IJAW ETHNIC NATIONALITY.

Given its size and status as the oldest ethnic group in the Niger Delta, it is expected that the Ijaws will take a leading role in the Niger Delta struggle for resource control and self-determination. This, we have been doing; the drive by Adaka Boro to free

the Niger Delta from the embrace of domination and exploitation, and the present role of the Ijaws in the mobilization of the Niger people for the resource control drive attest to this.

It is instructive to note that as a people, we have no alternative, but to take up this leadership challenge, and we must be seen to be doing this effectively. This calls for self-examination and dedication to our common destiny. On this, our participation in national politics must be redirected. The point to note here is that politics is the only tool that can liquidate our oppression. This is so because, the laws of any nation are a reflection of the superstructure,²¹ mainly the political which encompasses both the ideological, cultural and religious aspects of society.

It is clear that the domination and exploitation of Ijaw by Nigeria is defined by Ijaw's disadvantaged position in the political equation in Nigeria. Presently, we only have a "toe" hold in national politics and this cannot promote our leadership in the Niger Delta. In this regard, we need an Ijaw political machine; the character and operative principles of this machine can be decided on in all Ijaw Political Summit.

Whereas the Ijaws have taken a leading role in the Niger Delta struggle, its effectiveness has been undermined by some limitations. These include:

- (i) The violent and repressive character of the Nigeria State; demonstrated with the destruction of Odi, etc.

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- (ii) The lack of ethnic solidarity, largely due to factionalism (induced by the State and oil companies) as evidenced by intra/inter communal conflicts and intra/inter ethnic conflicts in Ijaw land and the Niger Delta.
- (iii) The greed and selfishness of some Ijaw leaders (at all levels of leadership) and the associated betrayal of hope and trust. This has undermined the identification between leadership and followership.
- (iv) The lack of congruence between the interests of Ijaw political leaders and the interests of the Ijaw nation. For example, the overwhelming support given to the ruling Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) in the 2003 general elections, even though the programmes and policies of the party stand in direct opposition to the common Ijaw interest; and
- (v) The high level of poverty and illiteracy, which give rise to irrational or incorrect decision/judgements; sometimes setting the Ijaw nation against the Nigeria State or mortgaging the destiny of our future generations.

It is clear that the task of leading the Niger Delta is a tall order. However, it is realizable if we anchor it on the TRUTH. We must therefore, be “IZONIC”

NOTE/REFERENCES

1. Ibaba, S. Ibaba, Understanding The Niger Delta Crisis. Jivac Publishing Company, Port Harcourt, 2001, p.1.
2. Ibid.
3. See World Bank Report, Defining An Environmental Development Strategy for the Niger Delta (Vol.1), 1995, p.1. Also, the Niger Delta Environmental Survey (NDES), Briefing Nitel, October, 1995, P.2.

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4. The Willinks Commission was one of the decisions of the 1957 constitutional conference, which preceded Nigeria's independence. It was established to look into the fears of domination by majority ethnic groups, expressed by the minority ethnic groups. Ijaws sought for a separate region, but the commission decided that "we cannot recommend political arrangements which would unite the body of Ijos. We consider that their belief that their problems are not understood could largely be met without the creation of a State". The Nigerian reality contradicts this assertion.
5. The Willinks Commission Report, Her Majesty Stationery Office, London, 1957, p.9.
6. Niger Delta Environmental Survey (NDES), Vol.4, Abridged version of PHASE 1 Report, September, 1997, p.35.
7. See OMPADEC Quarterly Report, Vol.1, No.1, October, 1993, Pp.80.
8. Ibaba S. Ibaba, Op.cit., P.3.
9. E. A. Alagoa, in the Survival (Organ of the Chikoko Movement), No.1, August, 1999, P.8.
10. See S. K. Owonaro, The History of Ijo (Ijaw and Her Neighbouring Tribes in Nigeria) Errata, Lagos, 1949, Pp.1-16.
11. The NDES Report Op. cit.
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14. E. J. Alagoa, Op.cit, Also read E. J. Alagoa (eds) The Land and People of Bayelsa State: Central Niger Delta, Onyoma Research Publications, Port Harcourt, 1999.
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17. Lemmy Owugha, “Local Resistance and the State”, Paper presented at Oil Watch Africa General Assembly, held at Port Harcourt, February, 9-15th, 1999, P.5.
18. Ogoni Bill of Rights, Cited in the Survival, Op.cit.
19. Read, Tony Tebekaemi, (eds) The Twelve-Day Revolution, Idodo Umeh Publishers, Benin, 1982, P.116.
20. The Kaiama Declaration, cited in the Survival, op.cit.
21. In Marxian political economy analysis, the Super Structure is the non-material aspect of society, which is anchored on the sub-structure – the material aspects of society. In this framework, the substructure largely determines what happens in the superstructure. The components of the superstructure include politics, culture, religion, etc. Politics is however, the most dominant component.