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## The Post-Colonial State, Minority Rights and Peasants' Revolts in Nigeria's Niger Delta

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### **Abstract**

*The expansion and development of capitalism involves the massive acquisition of land for mechanised capitalist agricultural production in both urban and rural areas at the expense of the peasantry who are the traditional custodians of rural lands. Peasants are therefore under constant pressure from all levels of government and the private sector, to lose their grip on rural landholdings and despite their heroic resilience appear to be losing ground in this battle for survival. The peasant who produces the agricultural surplus that has sustained Nigeria right from the colonial period has been marginalised but nonetheless remains a major factor in the Nigerian question. This paper examines the position of the peasantry as stakeholders in the Nigerian state or what has been articulated as the peasant question with reference to the national question. It argues that just as the creation of states and progress or gains from the resource control struggle have failed to impact positively on the peasantry there is huge doubt if the national question would address or redress the predicament of the peasantry in the pursuit of sustainable development. The objective of the paper is to critically reappraise the debate on the national question with respect to minority rights and peasant production in Nigeria. This study is based on the hypotheses that when minority rights are suppressed the greatest victim is the peasantry and that there is an inverse relationship between the recognition and protection of minority rights and the advancement of peasant production in a capitalist economy. The theory of the post-colonial state as espoused by scholars like Hamza Alavi and John Saul has been chosen to provide the theoretical framework for the study. This paper is significant for refocusing intellectual attention on the peasantry as a factor in the national question. The general conclusion is that as long as government policy fails to address the issue of peasant production so long will Nigeria's economic crisis persist. It is therefore recommended that the peasant issue be properly addressed as a critical nexus in the national question.*

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**Key words** – Peasantry, minority rights, national question, state power, capitalist economy, rural land

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### **Introduction:**

#### **Background to the Study**

Two contending views have been expressed on the historical pattern of evolution of Nigeria as a federation. More popular is the view that the Nigerian federation is a product of British administrative fiat, without which neither Nigeria as a nation in the shape it has assumed nor as a federation would have become a reality. British romance with federalism as a systemic structural pattern for integrating and unifying nationally large and heterogeneous societies began with Canada and with the success achieved was extended to Australia and elsewhere (Osuntokun, in Akinyemi et al, eds., 1980: 91-108). Hence, with the size and heterogeneous

nature of the emerging British colony in Nigeria it was rather obvious that federalism would be the choice of the colonial behemoth. However, what is considered to be a more objective interpretation of the pattern of evolution of the Nigerian federation is the role of historical and geographical factors. Livingston (referenced by Jinadu, in Akinyemi et al, eds., 1980: 13-25) has emphasised sociological factors or what he calls a “federal society” in determining the necessity for adopting the federal option for a state. He argued that:

The essential nature of federalism is to be sought for, not in the shading of legal and constitutional terminology, but in the forces – economic, social, political, cultural – that made the outward forms of federalism necessary . . . The essence of federalism lies not in the constitutional or institutional structure but in the society itself. Federal government is a device by which the federal qualities of the society are articulated and protected.

In this conceptualisation what necessitates the adoption of the federal system is the pre-existing heterogeneous nature of the society. Thus, a federal society predetermines the federal structure legally codified into a constitutional framework. It is therefore doubtful if a unitary form of government would be more successful in Nigeria in terms of unifying and integrating the various ethnic nationalities. As part of the build up toward independence, from 1950 the minorities began to show signs of apprehension over their position, rights and development prospects in an independent Nigeria. These fears were articulated and presented to the 1957 London Constitutional Conference (Ojiako, 1981: 41-46). Particularly the Niger Delta with a peculiarly difficult terrain but dominated by the three bickering major political parties representing the major ethnic groups began to develop doubts about possible marginalisation in an independent Nigeria. Thus began minority agitations for separate states from the three existing regions of North, East and West.

For the Nigerian polity it was not until 1954 that the constitution started to enact that debatable question, whether the states that make up Nigeria today could be said to be prior to the Nigeria of today. The various city states and empires that flourished before and during the European occupation now conglomerate as states. The difference between the pattern of development in Nigeria and that of the United States of America is that whereas institutional (modern) expression was not given to the different groups before independence in Nigeria, the original states of America were founded by difference kinds of settlers and for different purposes and preferred to keep their individual political identities as Pennsylvanians, Virginians or South Carolinians (Omoruyi, in Akinyemi et al eds., 1980: 373-374)..

As rightly observed the component parts of Nigeria today in form of states or as they existed before in form of regions did not negotiate to form a larger supra-entity called Nigeria in the shape they are. They had existed as Ijaw, Itshekiri, Hausa, Igbo, Igala, Tiv or Yoruba but first had to be aggregated as East, West and North before negotiating independent statehood on that basis. It could not even be said that the regions had evolved separate identities, well integrated as separate and independent states before negotiating supra-statehood. Between 1946 and 1960 was just fourteen years (14) years, a period not long enough to develop a sense of identity among the various pre-existing states that had been in existence for over three hundred years under powerful potentates (Nnoli, 1978: 6). The so-called regions only existed on paper and only lasted that long through the domineering instrumentality of the

majority ethnic groups and their respective majority political parties. Even within that short period the minority ethnic groups had formed their own political parties to protect and defend their interests against those of the majority (Sklar, 1963).

Furthermore, as weak and disunited as they were, further fragmentation began just three years after independence when the Mid-West Region was carved out of the West, that in itself was made possible only with the dismemberment of the Action Group and the incarceration of its leaders. Such was the fragility of the new supra-state that was formed and had to collapse only after six years (Anifowose, 1982: 59). Ironically, it has turned out that the Mid-West is the only state that has been created by a civilian administration. Further fragmentation of the Nigerian federation has been effected only by the military until the present twenty six states structure. Elsewhere I have referred to the “*constitutional and primordial component units of the Nigerian federation*” (Ogali, 2012: 271). Constitutionally it is the states that constitute the component units of the Nigerian federation but this status is only superficial as the real power and voice behind the ethnic nationalities are the ACF (Hausa/Fulani), Ohaneze (Igbo), Afenifere (Yoruba), INC (Ijaw), etc. (Sagay, Guardian Newspaper, April 30 & May 1, 2002)

The minorities question has been on the front-burner in national discourse since the 1940s but was initially suppressed by the majority ethnic groups in collaboration with the British colonial administration (Ojiako, 1981: 44-45; Ogali, 2012: 75-76). In 1966 under intense secessionist pressure General Gowon created twelve states more as an administrative masterstroke to weaken the Eastern Regional Government than a realisation of the need to address the minority question (Ademoyega, 1981: 136). With the curious coincidence of oil production replacing agricultural products as the primary source of critical national revenues states and local government creation agitations were hijacked by the majority ethnic groups that hitherto criminalised a similar struggle. Favoured by population, federal might, and several other factors it became an instrument in the hands of the majority ethnic groups to transfer oil wealth from the producing minority areas of the Niger Delta to develop the majority-dominated parts of the country (Etekepe, 2007: 34). Consequently, agriculture, which hitherto sustained the nation was abandoned, neglected and marginalised along with the peasantry that produced the wealth of the nation (Onimode, 1983: 168). That is not to say that the peasantry fared better prior to oil production.

The character of the Nigerian state has hardly changed in its colonial and post-colonial forms. Armed with the most oppressive instruments the same state apparatuses were bequeathed to the nationalist leadership dominated by majority elements in the same form, content and character and effectively utilised to suppress minority feelings and sensibilities in the post-colonial era. Ake (2001: 2-3) described the colonial state as “*all powerful . . . absolute . . . arbitrary . . . totalistic in scope . . . an apparatus of violence.*” These awesome state instruments are being deployed to alienate the peasantry from their means of livelihood and through various forms of exactions and deprivations sentenced them to perpetual misery. Amin (1978: 81) has argued that the nation appears when there exist not only the elementary conditions of geographical contiguity reinforced by the use of a common language but also a social class which controls the central state apparatus and ensures economic unity in the life of the community. This unification function of a ruling class in creating and consolidating nationhood at various levels is a key element in the national question. It is essentially a question of the modalities for power sharing and assured economic enclaves for the various segments of the ruling class. The national question is therefore most fundamentally a class question with the peasantry as a critical factor.

### **Statement of Research Problem**

Nigeria is being propped upon several questionable stilts, three of which this paper is designed to deal with. These are the peasant or agrarian question, the national question and the minorities' question. The research problem that forms the central focus of this paper is the position of the peasantry, the producers of national wealth and bearers of the burden of nationhood, in the national question in Nigeria. Peasants have never been considered as part of the national question, which has subjectively been articulated as a question of relations between ethnic nationalities, particularly the position of the minorities. Bourgeois scholarship and advocacy have presented it as a question of rights for oppressed, marginalised and dispossessed peoples, particularly minorities and others with various forms of identity issues. Minorities have been defined as groups that are:

Numerically inferior to the rest of the population of a state, in a non-dominant position, whose members possess ethnic, religious or linguistic characteristics differing from those of the rest of the population, and show, if only implicitly, a sense of solidarity directed towards preserving their culture, traditions, religion or language (cited in (Subaru, 2003: 5).

In Nigeria there has been a sustained agitation or struggle against marginalisation, exploitation, manipulation and subjugation of the ethnic minorities, a situation that has engendered a violent conflict in the oil producing areas of the Niger Delta in the South and the Middle-Belt region of the North. However, the national question, from a Marxist point of view, is essentially a class question, a veritable weapon by fractions of the ruling class to carve niches for themselves within sub-national boundaries i.e. regional parcels to be carved out for their exclusive domination and exploitation, which hardly changes or even improves the condition of perpetual poverty of the peasant majority and other oppressed classes.

At the national level the national question provides a tool for active participation in the distribution of the nation's resources (or national cake) in form of award of contracts, appointments and positions. It has been packaged as agitation for inclusion or recognition in an ethnically heterogeneous society like Nigeria. The oppressed classes, including the peasantry, are only used as tools in this agitation and then dumped when success is achieved. Where the agitation degenerates into a violent conflict it is the oppressed classes that lay their lives or shed their blood for the ethnic group or nationality without deriving any benefit from their struggle. Such was the situation during the state of emergency in the former Western Region, the violent crisis in the Middle-Belt, the Biafran Civil War and the Niger Delta crisis. The double-edged sword of ethnic crisis cuts through the majority as well as between the majority and minority ethnic nationalities. Ekekwe (1986: 111-112) agrees that ethnicity has been deployed as a tool for building patron-client relationships linking the working class and peasantry with state power through the ruling party. Areas dominated by opposition parties are made to suffer neglect and deprivation in terms of the distribution of projects. The same fate is meted out to the ethnic minorities. Hence, "*the charge of ethnic discrimination by minority-group elements in the petty bourgeois class*" has formed the basis for demands for creation of more states, an exercise that has not been generally beneficial to the exploited classes.

It has been argued that the seed of this crisis was sown by the British colonial administration (Nnoli, 1978: 5-8). As an instrument of conquest and colonisation imposed by British imperialism and eventually bequeathed to the Nigerian political leaders the character of the Nigerian state has hardly changed in its colonial and post-colonial forms. Armed with the most oppressive instruments the over-developed state (Alavi: 1972) was set against

undeveloped and backward social formations with state apparatuses dominated by majority elements in the same form, content and character and effectively utilised to suppress minority feelings and sensibilities in the post-colonial era. These same instruments are being deployed to alienate the peasantry from their means of livelihood and through various forms of exactions and deprivations sentenced them to life in perpetual misery. Amin (1978: 81) has argued that the nation appears when there exist not only the elementary conditions of geographical contiguity reinforced by the use of a common language but also a social class which controls the central state apparatus and ensures economic unity in the life of the community. This unification function of a ruling class in creating and consolidating nationhood at various levels is a key element in the national question. It is essentially a question of the modalities for power sharing and assured economic enclaves for the various segments of the ruling class.

The peasant factor has always been lost in the national equation and the specific research problem of this paper is the position of the peasantry in the national question. It is the central argument of this paper that the national equation or question cannot balance without addressing the agrarian question. Efforts to address the national question have witnessed the creation of several states out of the three regions with which Nigeria gained independence but the economic condition of the peasantry, the producers of the national wealth, has not improved substantially. The real question may not have been properly articulated. In the final analysis it may not be a question of ethnic balancing or inclusion but rather a question of the poor and miserable economic condition and political disempowerment of the peasantry and other oppressed classes in Nigeria.

The national question has been transformed into an oil question. The question of ethnic rights is now a question of the right to participate in or benefit from the distribution of oil wealth generated from the minority areas of the Niger Delta between elements of both the majority and minority ethnic elites. Ekekwe (1986: 142) affirms that “*demands for new states spearheaded by those among the petty bourgeoisie in each state who lacked control of or access to the state . . . Accumulation and enrichment were still very much the objective*”. This has been the logic behind the incessant creation of states and local government areas in Nigeria. Elements from the oil-bearing minority areas of the Niger Delta are now on the saddle but the peasants, whose land and rivers have been devastated in the process of oil production, have not experienced any remarkable improvement in their mode of life. This is the irony and contradiction of the national question in Nigeria and the essence of the specific contribution of this paper is captured with the following research questions:-

### **Objectives of Study**

1. To critically reappraise the debate on the national question with respect to minority rights and peasant production in Nigeria’s Niger Delta
2. To determine the implications of dispossessing peasants of their land without reabsorbing them into the structure of capitalist production in Nigeria.
3. To assess the impact of states creation and resource control gains on the peasantry in the Niger Delta
4. To examine the relevance of the advancement of minority rights to peasant production in the Niger Delta
5. To evaluate the contribution of the peasantry to national development and their gains from revenue allocation and distribution.
6. To investigate the impact of the processes involved in oil production on the productive activities of the peasantry in the Niger Delta.

### Research Questions

1. To what extent has the debate on the national question addressed the issue of rural poverty as an aspect of minority rights in Nigeria's Niger Delta?
2. What are the implications of dispossessing peasants of their land without reabsorbing them into the capitalist production process in Nigeria?
3. What has the peasantry gained from the numerous states creation exercises and the gains from the resource control struggle in the Niger Delta?
4. What is the relevance of the advancement of minority rights to peasant production in the Niger Delta?
5. What has the peasantry gained from national revenue allocation and distribution exercises despite their huge contribution to national development?
6. How have the different stages in oil production impacted on peasant agricultural production in the Niger Delta?

### Research Assumptions

1. The more the issue of rural poverty remains unaddressed as an aspect of minority rights in the Niger Delta the more government policies on agriculture and rural transformation tend to flounder.
2. The more peasants are dispossessed of their land without reabsorbing them into the production process the more Nigeria's economic crisis would be compounded.
3. The more states creation exercises and the gains from resource distribution are not beneficial to the peasantry the more the Niger Delta crisis loses its most fundamental relevance.
4. There is an inverse relationship between the advancement of minority rights and peasant production in Nigeria's Niger Delta.
5. The more peasants are marginalised despite their huge contributions to national development the more Nigeria's economic development would be stultified.
6. The more oil production impacts negatively on the environment the more rural peasant agricultural production in the Niger Delta would retrogress.
- 7.

### Conceptual Clarifications

The concept of peasantry - to Kemp (1993: 26) "[T]he wresting of a living from nature by the cultivation of the soil, this basic economic task of mankind, has been the *raison d'être* of the peasantry since settled agriculture began." Atieno-Odhiambo (in Gutkind & Waterman, 1977: 233) defines peasants as "those whose ultimate security and subsistence lies in their having certain rights in land and in the labour of family members, but who are involved, through rights and obligations, in a wider economic system which includes the participation of non-peasants." Wolf (1966: 3-4) views peasants as "rural cultivators whose surpluses are transferred to a dominant group of rulers that uses the surpluses to underwrite its own standard of living and to distribute the remainder to groups in society that do not farm but must be fed for their specific goods and services in turn."

Minority rights – Men, the revolutionaries asserted, possessed inalienable natural rights; society ought to be so arranged as to foster these rights. Diversity is a necessary feature of creation (Kedourie, 1979: 57). Nations are separate natural entities ordained by God and the best political arrangement obtains when each nation forms a state on its own. Harder (in Kedourie, 1979: ) argues that the true and lasting state is that is one where a nation is formed through natural kinship and affection. Examples are the Chinese and the Jews. On the contrary states in which there is more than one nation are unnatural, oppressive and doomed to decay like the Ottomans. The world is however too diverse for these narrow-minded

nationalist philosophies. In Nigeria the minorities question came to the fore from the mid 1950s leading to the setting up of the Willink Commission in 1957 (Suberu, 2003; 16-19). Article XIX of the African Charter of Human and People's Rights guarantees the right to existence of all peoples as well as the right to self-determination, to free themselves from the bonds of domination (Olanmi & Co, 2007:32).

Resource control – since the state and its multinational oil partners cannot take care of their developmental needs, they should give them back what naturally belongs to them so that they can take care of themselves. This is the climax of the Niger Delta conflict (Bassey & Akpan, in Okoko ed. Nigerian Journal of Oil and Politics, 2011: 16)

National question – The nation is a historical community of people that comes into existence with the formation of a common territory, common economic ties, a literary language, a general character, and certain cultural features that constitute its identifying traits (Yohanna, nd: 9). “the very word nation has been endowed by nationalism with a meaning and a resonance which until the end of the eighteenth century it was far from having” (Kedourie, 1979: 9). Nationalism supplies “a criterion for the determination of the unit of population proper to enjoy a government exclusively its own, for the legitimate exercise of power in the state, and for the right organisation of a society of states” (Kedourie, 1979: 9). The doctrine holds that humanity is naturally divided into nations, that nations are known by certain characteristics which can be ascertained, and that the only legitimate type of government is national self-government.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework for this paper is the theory of the post-colonial State or the state in post-colonial societies. It postulates that the natural and endogenous process of evolution of state structures in Third World societies was truncated by colonialism, which rather agglomerated several of them into broader social formations and imposed modern state structures on them. These state structures imposed to facilitate colonial occupation, political rule and economic exploitation was of a specific kind. This theory, formulated by Hamza Alavi, hinges on the:

historical specificity of the post-colonial societies, a specificity which arises from structural changes brought about by the colonial experience and alignment of classes and by the superstructures of political and administrative institutions which were established in that context, and secondly from radical re-alignments of class forces which have been brought about in the post-colonial situation (Alavi, New Left Review, 74, 1972, pp. 59-81).

The specific character of the colonial state, and by extension the post-colonial state, stems from its being a replication of the features of the advanced metropolitan capitalist state over predominantly undeveloped pre-capitalist social formations. Such a situation features a structural disconnect between state and society in the colonial situation as opposed to what obtained in the metropolis where the state evolved naturally out of the society that gave birth and a life rhythm to it. Consequently though the colonial state was a replica of the metropolitan capitalist state its character and mode of operation in the colonial society were distinct and unique. Alavi argues further that colonialism had to create a state in the colonial setting that is unique in several respects. The colonizing power had to:

[C]reate a state apparatus through which it can exercise dominion over all the indigenous social classes in the colony. It might be said that the “superstructure” in the colony is therefore, “overdeveloped” in relation to the “structure” in the colony, for its basis lies in the metropolitan structure itself, from which it is later separated at the time of independence. The colonial state is therefore equipped with a powerful bureaucratic-military apparatus and mechanisms . . . The post-colonial society inherits that overdeveloped apparatus of state and its institutionalized practices through which the operations of indigenous social classes are regulated and controlled (Alavi: *ibid*).

Colonialism created an overdeveloped state apparatus over and above the relatively undeveloped traditional social structures, institutions and processes and deployed it to suppress, oppress, exploit and transfer their resources to meet the needs of the metropolis. These overdeveloped state apparatuses were inherited by the post-colonial state and effectively utilized to suppress and exploit the working class and peasants. The process of exploitation of the lower classes recognises no ethnic bounds or solidarity. The ethnic kite is flown only as an ideological subterfuge to manipulate the oppressed classes. In Nigeria it has been argued that elements from the majority ethnic nationalities have monopolized the institutions of the post-colonial state and accordingly also monopolized the resources of the state to the exclusion of those from the minority areas. This is the basis of the agitations for creation of more states. However, from three (3) regions at independence in 1960 to thirty-six (36) states currently while the process has offered opportunities for the enrichment of members of the ruling class from minority areas the poor and miserable economic condition of the peasantry has hardly changed. The national question in Nigeria is therefore most fundamentally a class question and the peasantry is a critical factor in that question. Onimode (1983:228) has posited that:

Even though the bureaucratic bourgeoisie as a whole have been controlling the Nigerian state since 1960, different strata within that class, as well as the imperialist bourgeoisie, have exercised differential control over the state apparatus and enjoyed uneven rates of surplus appropriation. Such differences of access have led to intra-elite clashes over many issues.

Politics is essentially a struggle to be on the saddle to preside over the allocation of values, which allocations are authoritative, and these authoritative allocations are binding on the society as a whole (Easton, 1953) or who gets what, when and how (Lasswell, 1948). In Nigeria this struggle is primarily between the majority ethnic groups and between them and the minorities. Some of the negative outcomes of the struggle include a civil war, military coups and counter-coups, militancy, insurgency, etc. All these have failed to transform the peasantry out of their condition of poverty.

### **Methodology**

The method of data collection to be adopted for this study is mainly secondary, from sources such as historical records, internet materials, academic journals, newspaper reports, news magazines and content analysis of archival records, annual surveys of political rights and civil liberties organisations like Human Rights Watch, etc. As much as possible the shortfall in empirical content would be reduced with the collection of valid data from the reliable secondary sources stated above. Data analysis relied mainly on the Marxist political economy



approach in recognition of the inseparability of the economic and the political, the interface between which produces the objective as well as subjective social phenomena under investigation. Class analysis is therefore a major component of this study and also to feature prominently are related concepts such as exploitation, surplus production, alienation, commodity production and exchange relations, oppression and revolutionary action, which is a by-product of the political reactions to socio-economic contradictions.

### Significance of Study

The major contribution this study has made to the advancement of knowledge is its emphasis on the need to refocus academic and public policy attention on the peasantry in any discourse on national development, minority rights, resource control, revenue allocation and distribution, rural development or transformation and capitalist development. For policy makers the study shows that the peasantry is a major player in the Nigerian project, a major factor in the Nigerian equation and should therefore be given proper attention in public policy formulation. Indeed the Nigerian national equation cannot balance without the peasantry. For the general public the study has revealed that peasants are the source of daily food supplies, raw materials for industries and revenue for the government deserve better attention and encouragement in order to contribute more to the national wealth.

### Data Presentation and Analysis

The presentation of data or results of research findings and their analysis begins with the display of some critical baseline data on Nigeria's Niger Delta. Rather than provide basic facilities and contribute to the development of host communities the multinational oil companies operating in the Niger Delta focus more on the security of their facilities. Consequently, 20 per cent of Shell's workforce is devoted to security. On 19<sup>th</sup> July 1970 an oil spill at the Bomu Field (Bomu II) operated by Shell on agricultural land impacted 607 communities. It is estimated that between 9 million – 13 million barrels of oil have been spilled since oil drilling started in the Niger Delta in 1958.

Table 1: Causes of Oil Spills in Nigeria's Niger Delta

S/No	Cause	Percentage of Total	Responsibility
1.	corrosion of pipelines and tankers	(50% of all spills),	companies' responsibility
2.	sabotage	28%,	Community responsibility
3.	oil production operations	21%,	companies' responsibility
4.	inadequate or non-functional production equipment	1%.	companies' responsibility
	Total	100%	

Source: Shell International Petroleum Company "Developments in Nigeria", London: March 1995 (modified)

An estimated 5 – 10% of Nigeria's mangrove ecosystem has been wiped out through spills. Nigeria leads the rest of the world in the flaring of associated gas. Of 3.5 billion cubic feet of associated gas produced in Nigeria 2.5 billion cubic feet, constituting about 70% is flared. Gas flares release poisonous chemicals such as nitrogen dioxide, sulphur dioxide, volatile organic compounds like benzene, toluene, xylene, and hydrogen sulphide as well as

carcinogens like benzopyrene and dioxin (Juhasz, 2009). According to Amnesty International 70% of the six million people in the Niger Delta live on less than US\$1 per day. Natural gas reserves in the Niger Delta are well over 187 trillion ft., three times more than crude oil reserves.

Contribution of oil to the national economy rose from an insignificant 0.1% in 1959 to 87% in 1976. Nigeria has a total of 159 oil fields and 1481 wells in operation. There are over 5,000 km of pipelines across the Niger Delta linking 275 flow stations to various export facilities.

### **The Agrarian Question and the National Question**

Beckman (1974) views the peasant question as “*a question of the material condition of the peasantry, being the most oppressed mass segment of the society*”.

The characterisation of the national question in Nigeria in terms of the active participation of the citizenry, variously defined, in the distribution of the nation's resources (or national cake) in form of award of contracts, appointments and positions has grave implications for the peasantry. Primarily these revenue distribution mechanisms are mediated through the creation of states and local government areas. All across Nigeria the immediate effect of the creation of such administrative units is the erection of new social and physical infrastructure, a rapid expansion of the capital cities and local government headquarters, all of which constitute a huge loss to the peasantry. For instance Lagos city has expanded far into Badagry and Ikeja, Abuja is the story of a massive city expansion and transformation encompassing the satellite peasant communities of Gwagwalada, Kuje, Nyanyan, Abaji, etc. When Gongola State was created a new urban conurbation that sprawled to Yola from Jimeta formed a much larger state capital. In several other cities like Enugu, Onitsha, Ibadan, Ilorin and Port Harcourt the Greater City concept has been adapted to city growth and expansion.

In Nigeria almost every State can boast of a federal university in addition to the state universities that are ever expanding with the increasing annual admission pressure. Land grabbing by the Federal, State and local governments as well as private sector land developers for development purposes is a capitalist conspiratorial strategy against the peasantry. All these ambitious visions and expansive development strategies aid the depeasantization process i.e. a steady reduction in available land for peasant production, a decline in their populations, an escalation of their condition of poverty, the loss of their political voice and relevance and a sharp slump in their productive capacity in developing countries, including Nigeria.

Nigeria's Niger Delta region presents a peculiar challenge in peasant historical experience during the process of capitalist transformation from a pre-capitalist background. My thesis here is that the security volatility of the Niger Delta region is attributable mainly to the subdued rumblings of the peasantry whose farmlands and fishing rivers are polluted, devastated and rendered uncultivable without the peasants being reabsorbed into the capitalist production structure. In addition, despite the creation of several states and local government councils as a means of resolving the national question the poverty and misery of the peasantry has remained unaddressed and even worsened.

Basically two forms of depeasantisation are identifiable in Nigeria's Niger Delta. One, through the dispossession of peasant lands for projects and modern farming and two, through the destruction of the production milieu of the peasantry by the activities of the oil and gas companies. Ironically unlike the experience in Europe the dispossessed peasants are not being proletarianised but are rather being ejected into non-productive livelihoods in destitution and penury. Exemplification of peasant frustration resulting from economic modernisation is derivable from their aggressive and revolutionary disposition toward the

multinational oil companies. As reaction, non-violent peasant confrontations in Nigeria's Niger Delta have been waged without against the violently oppressive agencies of the state, whose hostile disposition toward the peasants resulted in their children carrying arms against the state in what is termed militancy.

My contention here is that militancy in the Niger Delta is the result of the violent reaction, most times with casualties, by the security agencies or outfits of the state and multinational oil companies against peaceful peasant protests aimed at just calling attention to the destruction of their natural environment. Watching their parents gunned down, molested, wounded and frustrated the children drew the inevitable conclusion that the only way to force the state to listen to the peasants and address their condition is to confront the security forces with superior arms purchased with money obtained from non-conformist activities, most importantly by gaining access to the oil itself through illegal means such as pipeline vandalism, illegal oil bunkering, etc.

These were all the products of deep-rooted frustration and angst against the state's attitude and treatment of peasant actions. It is said that necessity is the mother of inventions. To demonstrate and concretise my thesis on the transition from non-violent peasant agitations to armed militancy I would cite the following examples of peaceful peasant protests that were violently suppressed by the security agencies with records of casualties:-

1. Umuechem in Etche, Rivers State against Shell in 1990
2. Ogoni in Rivers State against Shell in 1993
3. The Ilaje Community in Ondo State against Chevron in May 1998
4. Opia and Ikiyan Communities in Delta State against Chevron in January 1999
5. Choba in Rivers State against Wilbros/Shell in 1999
6. Liama in Bayelsa State against Shell in January 2002
7. Itshekiri women from Ugborodo Communities in Delta State against Chevron in June 2002
8. Ijaw women from Gbaramatu and Egbema Kingdoms in Delta State against Chevron in July 2002

To align the peasant actions listed above to the pattern of development of militancy in the Niger Delta I argue that most of them are within the long stretch of the riverine belt inhabited by the Ijaw ethnic nationality. This belt includes Ondo, Delta, Bayelsa, Rivers and Akwa Ibom States. It is a curious coincidence that the most celebrated militant leaders in the Niger Delta such as Ateke Tom, Asari Dokubo and Tompolo are of Ijaw extraction and that their militant activities started after the series of peasant revolts that were violently suppressed by the security agencies and the private security outfits of the multinational oil companies.

In November 1999 a rural peasant community called Odi Town in Bayelsa State was completely destroyed with several casualties in a raid code-named Operation HAKURI 11 by the Nigerian police in a retaliatory operation after some policemen were killed in a dispute over compensation and corporate social responsibility involving the Shell oil location in the Abasari forest. Similarly in January 1999 Nigerian troops, using Chevron helicopters, boats and hardware moved against protesting peasants and their youth occupying an offshore drilling platform and destroyed the Ijaw villages of Opia and Ikiyan in Delta State. Many houses were set ablaze and several people killed (Ogali, 2011: 208). The two communities had sent some of their women to Serial 4 Chevron Rig to request that the company provide some facilities in the Community in the spirit of good neighbourliness. The company dismissed the women and requested that the men should come, but the destruction was their response. It was a completely unprovoked and disproportional attack.

In June 2002 over two thousand (2000) Itshekiri peasant women from Ugborodo in Delta State occupied the Chevron Escravos Tank Farm stopping both planes and helicopters

from either landing or taking off. About one thousand workers were also held hostage. The intervention of the Governor, Chief James Ibori ended the siege (Ogali, 2011: 209). A month later, in July 2002, about one thousand five hundred Ijaw women from Gbaramatu and Egbema kingdoms in Delta State invaded four (4) NNPC/Chevron Flow Stations. Even their husbands were taken by surprise as plans for the operation were kept secret. Their demands were the normal provision of basic infrastructure, employment, business patronage, financial empowerment, setting up of SMEs. As usual empty promises were made and the women dispersed (Ogali, 2011: 209-210). It is instructive that this is the home of militant leader, Tompolo.

Another very relevant example is that of the Ogoni resistance led by the activist Late Ken Saro-Wiwa animated by non-violent principles and strategies but nonetheless tasted the bitter pill of state violence by the police and military forces leading to their massacre, rape, maiming, intimidation and suppression. The aftermath was the emergence of a notorious militant leader from that axis in person of Solomon Ndigbara (aka Osama bin Laden) from Yeghe in Gokana Local Government Area of Rivers State, who has become a thorn in the flesh of the Nigerian state. Shell discovered the Bomu oil field in February 1958, but by 1993 when the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP) led the Ogoni to stop Shell from further extraction of oil from Ogoniland there were eight (8) oilfields; Bomu, Bodo West, Tai, Korokoro, Yorla, Lubara, Creek, Afam, and Ebubu, all operated by Shell in Ogoniland. *“The bulk of the fields were in Gokana clan, which also has the largest population concentration in Ogoni”* (Okonta, 2008: 138). A military contingent led by the infamous Lt. Col. Paul Okuntimo in 1993 unleashed terror on the Ogoni peasants and by 1995 an estimated 2,000 Ogoni peasants had been extra-judicially killed (Ogali, 2011: 203).

All this goes to show and reinforce my thesis that the Niger Delta crisis is primarily and more fundamentally a peasant crisis and has not been addressed by the national question. Peasants are the victims of land seizure for projects, environmental pollution, corruption and underdevelopment, state repression and betrayal by political leaders. They are also the victims of compensation politics and conspiracy between the multinational oil companies and their local leaders, particularly the traditional rulers. Peasants are only used by politicians as propaganda tools to attract national and international attention and sympathy. Even the Amnesty Programme failed to capture the peasants.

The Nigerian post-colonial state, since its emergence at independence in 1960 has remained wobbly due to the inadequate integration of the various ethnic nationalities that compose it.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion therefore the efforts of the Nigerian post-colonial state to address the national question by creating more states as a means of integrating the various ethnic nationalities that compose it has failed to positively impact on the livelihoods of the peasants and their productivity. It was perceived that the creation of more states would integrate the minorities into the Nigerian society by giving them a sense of belonging. However the sustained calls for the creation of still more states shows that the national question has not been resolved. Therefore no matter how many states are created the poor condition of the peasants will not change positively in so far as the agrarian question has not been properly and comprehensively addressed. With particular reference to the Niger Delta the operations of the multinational oil companies which have destroyed the peasants' means of production (land) has compounded the problems of the peasants despite the creation of more states. It is this crisis that has resulted in the various peasant revolts and militancy in the Niger Delta. The introduction of the Amnesty Programme for repentant militants is not the solution to the

Niger Delta crisis so long as the peasants remain excluded from the programme and no alternative programme addresses their plight.

### Recommendations

Based on the conclusions drawn above this paper makes the following recommendations:-

1. The Nigerian state should introduce a programme aimed at improving the productive activities and quality of life of the peasants.
2. The spate of acquisition of peasants' land should be controlled and where their land is so acquired adequate compensation and an alternative line of business or occupation provided for them.
3. Environmental protection in the oil producing areas of the Niger Delta should be pursued vigorously so that peasants' productive activities can continue alongside oil production.
4. The policy of corporate social responsibility by the multinational oil companies should be properly articulated and implemented as a means of dowsing tension between host communities and the companies.
5. The Nigerian state should take seriously the physical development of the Niger Delta just as is being done in Abuja.
6. Peasant protests, wherever they occur, should not be repressed, but rather dialogue, compromise and other peaceful methods adopted to resolve them.
7. The Nigerian state should also ensure that the peasants actually benefit from the compensations paid for the negative impact of oil production on their environment.

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