

## THE NIGER DELTA IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE, 1800–1960

Francis C. Odeke<sup>1</sup>, Agomuo, Kelvin Obinna<sup>2</sup> & Chukwulet, Chinenyenwa Obiaku<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Research Scholar, Department of History and International Relations, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Ebonyi State University, Abakaliki, Nigeria

<sup>2</sup>Research Scholar, Department of History and International, Relations, Abia State University, Uturu, Nigeria

<sup>3</sup>Research Scholar, Department of History and International Studies, Alvan Ikoku Federal College of Education, Owerri, Imo, Nigeria

Received: 06 Mar 2021

Accepted: 22 Apr 2021

Published: 30 Apr 2021

### ABSTRACT

*The Niger Delta region of Nigeria is a wealthy area. It is rich in natural resources, especially crude oil. The region is equally good for international trade because of its harbours which encourage the berthing of foreign trading vessels. Ironically, the Niger Delta has become a good illustration of the Shakespearean saying that “foul is fair and fair is foul.” With its abundant wealth, the Niger Delta region has become too restive and insecure because of the poverty and underdevelopment ravaging the people. This paper examines in historical perspective the blessings and curses of the region between 1800 and 1960. In the 1800s, the European mutual trade relations with the delta region were still at their best while in 1960 Nigeria was granted political independence, and oil exploration in the country was still at its teething stage with the first oil export from the country just in 1959. The study is thematic, using the historical methods of analysis and narration. Its data derive from the secondary sources. The paper argues that the misfortunes of the Niger Delta stem centrally from fortunes and greed. But particularly from European traders who spread the gospel of individual accumulation in the region and encouraged the people to accept and live by it.*

**KEYWORDS:** Niger Delta, Trade, European Imperialists, Resource Control, Divide and Rule, Insecurity

### INTRODUCTION

The Niger Delta region of Nigeria comprises of communities that are located between the coast of the River Niger and the Atlantic Ocean. But political and administrative conveniences have added some upland communities to these core Delta areas. The importance of the Niger Delta to Nigeria’s socio-economic and political growth since the pre-slave trade days cannot be over-emphasized. Apart from the fact that the River Niger and the Atlantic Ocean provide the populations of this region immediate opportunities to engage in their predominant occupations of fishing and subsistence farming, Alagoa (1970) said that the area has been a beehive centre for commerce and economic activities to many in the neighbourhood and other distant peoples, including Europeans.

The expeditions of European explorers and missionaries exposed the Niger coast as a veritable trade centre. Portuguese traders were the first to flock the area as mutual traders, introducing the economy of the region to the capitalist system of Europe. (Dike, 1956) The Portuguese did not interfere with the trade rights of the Delta middlemen beyond exchanging their European goods with the people’s raw materials at the coast where they were restricted to. (Ofonagoro, 1979) It was not until the discovery of the New World in 1492 (i.e. in the 15th century), and the subsequent development

of plantation economy there, that the Europeans changed the nature of their trade with the Delta people from the exchange of goods to trade in human beings. With that switch the Niger Delta middlemen traders were excessively made corrupt by the Europeans who supplied them arms and lots of material gifts that encouraged wide raids for slaves to satisfy the plantation labour needs of the Europeans at Sao Tome, Fernando Po.(Ejituwu,2002)

As the plantation economy expanded in the New World and slave services became indispensable in Europe, the Niger Delta became a haven for slave harvests. For more than four hundred years, the area was one of the major sources of African slaves to the Americas and Europe.(Imbua, 2012:v)Many of the Niger Delta traders, especially the Chiefs, developed formidable trading empires with the hinterland communities from where the slaves were taken. The Chiefs prospered beyond measure in their partnership with the capitalist traders in human beings. The delta communities quickly developed into city-states, with Grand Bonny as the most prominent.

As the slave trade flourished and the slave entrepreneurs with it, Europe and the Americas developed into industrial economies through slave labour. When the continuous influx of slaves into the Western climes became economically unviable, Europe abolished the trade as an illegal enterprise. From there the trade was equally abolished in the Americas which were still colonies to European powers. Trade in slaves was replaced with trade in palm products for soap manufacture and to lubricate the machinery of the European industrial revolution. Ikime (1968) said that the Niger Delta was again an important source of the required raw materials. The Chiefs of the region were sponsored and encouraged to fetch the oil from their hinterland communities for the Europeans. The focus was no longer on slaves but on palm oil and other forest products; and in the new legitimate commerce, the Delta Chiefs prospered and became powerful as middle men between the Europeans and the hinterland producers of the sylvan products. (Ofonagoro, 1979)

Thus, the economic situation in Europe and the Americas determined the well-being of people in the Niger Delta, their social relations and most often, the turbulent relationship they maintained with their hinterland trade partners. By that order, capitalist imperialism was firmly introduced into the Niger Delta region. While the European traders in the region struggled for higher shares of the legitimate commerce, they armed the indigenous traders to intimidate the hinterland suppliers to remain pliant and devoted in their business deals with the Delta middlemen. (Ikime, 1968) That ensured a steady flow of the articles of trade to the foreigners. The bitter rivalry encouraged in the region by the Europeans sometimes snowballed into full scale wars among the Delta communities, and sometimes a split of one erstwhile powerful trading city-state occurred. The stiff competition among the Europeans to control the trade against the wish of the delta chiefs eventually resulted to gun-boat and deportation diplomacy in which many great leaders of the Delta Kingdoms were victims. With that development, the imperialist European traders took over the Niger Delta trade, the hinterland communities and established themselves as the real masters of the peoples and their affairs.

The situation continued to the mid-20th Century when crude oil was discovered in the Niger Delta region, (Nwankwo, 1982) and the people were totally displaced from their own affairs by multinational corporations of imperial Europe and America. Again, the divide and rule system of the multinational bodies encouraged endless arms struggle in the area. In the aftermath, the people turned aggressive even against them selves because of the abject poverty and misery they were schemed into, leaving restiveness as a culture in the life of the once merry people.(Middleton, 2007) These negative effects of oil are calculated to the advantage of the multinationals whose capitalist philosophy nurtures the ill effects. It is this negative impact on a people seemingly blessed by God that warrants the question asked by Obayiuwa (2012): Is oil truly a curse to the Niger Delta?

### A Review of Some Literatures on the Origin of the Niger Delta Peoples

Tracing the origins of the peoples of the Niger Delta will remain as difficult as tracing the origin of the Igbo people since the two groups, before 1500, were all pre-historic societies in the southern part of what was to become Nigeria. Afigbo (1980:73) held that it is difficult to give a historical account of such groups. Those who seek to do so can easily fall victims to either wild romanticism or sterile skepticism. Also, about a preliterate Ibibio people, Alagoa (1980:58) said that “the earliest scholars to work among the Ibibio concluded that the absence of traditions of origin meant that the people were of hoar antiquity “who could no longer remember an earlier home.”

Available records on the origins of the Niger Delta peoples are not particular about their earlier homes before they settled where they are found. Great scholars who tried studying the origin of the different groups found in the region seemed ‘ensnared by the one or the other’ oversight (Afigbo, 1980) as each of the scholars took varied perspectives on their chosen communities of study. For instance, K.O. Dike who is credited as the pioneer African scholar to take up a serious academic study of the Niger Delta, posited in his work published in 1956, that “perhaps the Niger Delta was peopled by three distinct waves of migration from the tribal hinterland. The earliest, that of the Ijaw, appear to have preceded the Portuguese advent. A detailed analysis of their traditions of origin indicates that they believe Benin to have been their ancestral habitat.”(p.21) None the less, Dike cautioned that “this claim, which may be true of some places, must be received with reservations in the case of others until more supporting evidence is forth coming, especially as the temptation to claim Benin origin is very strong.”(Dike, 1956)

When J. Talbot who was a colonial officer, studied parts of the Niger Delta, he came up with ambiguous conclusions about the origins of the places he studied. Example, in his *Tribes of the Niger Delta: Their Religion and Customs*, published in 1932, Talbot maintained that the founders of Abua “descended from heaven on a rope let down by *Ake* (the Supreme God) and touched down at Olokpogha, a place which is currently a primeval forest and central shrine of Abua people (who) are also called *Erugh Ogboko*. (Otto, 2000:8) That theory is similar to the mythical account of the origin of the Yoruba which claim that Oduduwa, the founder of the Yoruba people, came down from heaven by a chain let down by Olorun, the Supreme God, who sent him to create the earth. (Stride and Ifeka, 1971:288-290; Crowder, 1976:37) These traditions that lack the evidence of historical reality are the same as those hoar communities that have lost knowledge of their origins. (Alagoa, 1980. 58) They sound too simple and fallacious to qualify for a historical account.

Again, Talbot had produced a report on the list of the early Kings in Ijo and other peoples of the Niger Delta which G.I. Jones (1963:25) condemned as a desperate attempt of a colonial officer to satisfy a European demand or a quirk response to European stimuli. The period of Talbot’s untrue list, according to Jones, fell between 1914 and 1916, when Talbot was a District Officer representing the British government in Degema Province of the Niger Delta region.

On July 30th, 1958, the Commission of Enquiry into the Fears of the Minorities submitted its report to the British Parliament. In its attempt to recount the origins of the peoples of the Niger Delta, the Commission wrote thus as part of page 8 of its report:

beyond Urhobo, however, the strength of the attachment to Benin rapidly diminishes.

There are two peoples here in the south of the Delta Province to whom special reference must be made. The Western Ijaw Division is inhabited mainly by the Ijaw tribe, of whom

there are some 80,000 in the creeks and swamps of the Eastern Region. They are said to be a people who have lived in the area now called Nigeria longer than any other of the larger tribes and were probably pushed down into the Delta area in times of which no record has survived (Commission's Report, 1958)

That account, as it seems, tends to another hoar antiquity since neither the people nor the Commission of Enquiry could establish any exact place of origin of the Niger Delta groups on the ground of no record surviving into the present age. The Commission's report further stated inter alia:

The country in which they live is divided by creeks and inlets of the sea and of the Niger into many small islands, which nowhere rise far above the highest tides and floods, their transport is by water and construction of roads or railways would be prohibitively expensive. There is a country which through no fault of man, has been neglected and which is unlikely ever to be highly developed; they are distinct in their language and customs from either the Edo speakers or the Yoruba.

Benin claimed over lordship of them at one time but they show no desire to return to it.

(Commission's Report, 1958)

Parts of the Niger Delta peoples might have settled in Benin but later left, and would not want to return there possibly, because of an upheaval in early Benin Empire. (Crowder, 1976:59) Crowder equally stated that Ijo peoples had inhabited the delta area long before the arrival of the Portuguese but that they were settled in small scattered villages in the tidal zone. They have a history of moving southward from the north-west. According to Alagoa (1980:68), it is likely that the Ijo have existed as a separate group in the Niger Delta for at least five thousand years. He maintained that the people had migrated and expanded within the length and breadth of the Niger Delta area rather than migrating from outside the place. But Alagoa noted that there were later migrations of different groups out of the central delta that formed communities like Ogobiri, Oporoma, Ikibiri, Obiama and the Apo Creek. Secondary dispersals took off from these communities to form eastern delta communities like Ke and Oboloma; and Oproza in the western part. (Alagoa, 68-69)

From the view of archaeology, Derefaka (1997:116) traced the origin of the Niger Delta back to the cretaceous times, and its expansion to the early tertiary times when it started moving in cumulatively seaward direction within which some local regressions and transgressions were indentified. Alagoa (1980:69-70) said that there was another stage of migrations that saw the Nembe moving from Obiama, and later from Itsekiri in Western delta; and Elem Kalabari and Bonny from a region between Ogobiri and Kolokuma in the central delta into the hinterland area where their limited knowledge of the environment and the hostility of earlier occupants forced them back into the delta region. Some Ijo migrants were believed to have left Ikibiri for Okirika Island where they co-habited with other groups from other places within the delta. This was said to have taken place more than one thousand years ago.

Literatures on the Niger Delta, especially on its origin, are numerous. But while many of them focus only on trade and politics of the states of the region, none considers the migrations of the people beyond old Benin Kingdom and other waves of migrations within the delta area and its immediate environments, making them look like mere conjectures of the scholars which leaves a lacuna in the efforts to trace the exact origin of the Niger Delta peoples. The search may lead nowhere in particular, especially given the complex contemporary structure of the region which has included many far and near upland areas as part of the delta region. That makes tracing the actual origin of the peoples of the delta region a difficult task just as the search for the origin of the state by political philosophers has remained fruitless. (Hopkins, 1973:5) However, if the primary occupations of the populations of the Niger Delta peoples are critically considered, it is possible to link them to the early aquatic peoples of northward Africa who were forced down south, and then into the forest areas, by the great desiccation of the Sahara between the fifth and second millennium B.C. (Hopkins, 1987:12)

### **Imperial Development in the Niger Delta**

It is obvious that before the arrival of Portuguese traders, the peoples of the Niger Delta had existed cordially with their neighbors, mostly through trade. That trade encouraged different social systems that helped cement the affairs of the people tightly. Later in about 1500, the Portuguese arrived as mutual traders in the delta region. The mutual trade went on for a long time under the mercantile system of Europe. Throughout that period there was no need for arms in the trade relations of the people with their hinterland partners or with the Europeans who were based at the coast. The trade was simply by the exchange of forest commodities by the delta traders for the foreign goods brought by the Portuguese.

When the Americas were discovered in 1492 as the New World, Europeans who rushed there for colonies soon developed a new economy in plantation agriculture which required extensive human labour to grow the cash crops needed in the expanding capitalist industrial economy of Europe. Capitalism can only be successful by exploited cheap labour that yields surplus output. After experimenting with white and Indian labourers, Africa with its enormous strong human resources was discovered as the answer to the plantation needs of the New World. The Portuguese who had remained just mutual traders, especially at the coastal areas of West Africa in particular, saw opportunities of high profits in supplying the human labour needs of the New World plantations. Since the human beings must be gotten at a very cheap cost for the expected high profits, there was the need to be properly prepared with arms to get the slaves under duress, intimidate them into submission and obedience for onward movement to the overseas markets where they were disposed of as common market commodities to buyers. Imbua (2012: v) wrote that African slaves were “forcefully uprooted from their land, transported in the most inhuman conditions to serve the labour needs of the New World, denied basic rights, opportunities and fruits of their labour, subjected daily to degrading violence, compelled through threats and legalized violence to renounce their cultures and humanity.”

The Portuguese traders were still not conversant with the hinterland trade and the kind of politics that went with it. They were permanently stationed at the coast where they received their goods from the delta middlemen. In the new slave trade, it was these delta middlemen that the European traders depended on for their human articles of trade. Thus, they quickly groomed the middlemen in the use of fire arms, and supplied them enough of them to carry out frequent raids of the hinterland sources of slaves. (Crowder, 1976:60) That was how the early phase of European imperialism was introduced in the Niger Delta region.

This imperial development prospered many of the Delta traders so much so that they saw a necessity in constituting themselves into a class of rulers and authorities in their respective communities, making it easier for European traders to pursue their trade interests. (Ikime, 1968; 3; Crowder, 1976: 61) The Europeans profited handsomely from the stratification because it helped them to manage the ‘trust’ conditions of the trade through the established and wealthy traders who alone commanded influence over the small traders as well as the hinterland suppliers. The wealthy traders stood as guarantees to the small traders for goods given to them on trust. From their stupendous income from the “comey” (a kind of trade duty paid to the Delta middlemen by European traders) and the various taxes from the small traders, the wealthy traders were able to acquire enough fire arms from their European trade partners to enable them force full compliance to all trade terms on the hinterland communities, especially when those communities seemed to be failing in their obligations to the wealthy Delta middlemen. (Ikime, 1968:5-6; Cooley, 1973:107, 123)

On many occasions, such expeditions drew the delta middlemen against some European traders who were anxious to penetrate the hinterland territories, the very source of their desired goods. The unwillingness of their delta partners to allow that ambition led to the rapid development of imperial tendencies in the Niger Delta. The Europeans often instigated costly rivalries among the delta traders for their own trade interests or in a bid to secure easy passage into the interiors. According to Dike (1956:13), the African Association formed in England in about 1788, and representing a galaxy of European interests, sent expedition after expedition to scour the interior of the African continent. On the scramble to control the hinterland trade, Dike said that the attitude of both the European and African traders, especially during and after the abolition of the slave trade, was the same due to the enormous fortune derivable from it. The European slave merchants could not imagine Britain that had been industrialized solely through slave labour abolishing the trade, and their African agents believed the trade was ordained by God Himself and so, its end was beyond the imagination of man. As the King of Great Bonny Kingdom, William Dappa Pepple, had told the abolitionists in Bonny:

We (i.e. the King and Council) think that this trade must go on.

That also is the verdict of our Oracle and Priests. They say that

your country, however great, can never stop a trade ordained

by God himself. (Dike, 1956: 13)

It was such a position by many African leaders against the abolition of the evil trade when it had become practically not profitable to the British economy that informed the rise of Britain’s military presence in the Niger Delta, and therefore, the escalation of imperialism in the region. Many delta Kings lost their positions and sovereignty through a gun-boat diplomacy that replaced the slave trade with a legitimate commerce in palm products and other forest goods produced by the hinterland communities. The heightened rivalry between the European supercargoes, the delta Chiefs and the hinterland producers, led to a buildup of arms, and consequently outbreak of wars among the Chiefs and their communities on one hand, and the hinterland areas on the other. The European traders saw the steaming competition as a good opportunity to intervene directly in the affairs of the Delta communities. Thus was introduced Consular Politics to oversee European trade interests. Gradually all indigenous administrative and economic structures were displaced with Courts of Equity that arbitrated every dispute of the delta people. The target was for the European traders to secure free access to peaceful trade as well as have a legal institution to punish all intransigent communities. (Cooley, 1973:58) With that, the Europeans equally secured protection rights with weaker delta states through questionable agreements or treaties



which meant handing themselves over to full European imperial rule. Soon many powerful states turned victims of the new political scheme as they tried to continue their domination over the weaker states as well as keep their respective sovereignties. Consequently, many of them lost totally in the quest and were eventually deported out of their states to very far lands where they later died, leaving their states and peoples, including their hinterland markets, to the full penetration and control of European imperial traders.

### **Niger Delta in Global Trade**

Contemporarily, scholars may be tempted to see the Niger Delta region as the hub of global trade in oil in the West African coast. To that end, the scholars will be considering the great quantity of crude oil (the Black Gold) that is taken and traded out of the area, and whose wealth is rather used in the development of other regions to the isolation of the region. While that conclusion may be right, and to an extent, acceptable, it is important to note that the present trading status of the Niger Delta in global oil trade is a development from earlier developments in the delta area.

First, it is believed that most communities of the delta started from a central region called the Central Delta where farming was possible and predominant. Fishing was possible there too but was a secondary occupation engaged in by men only. As time went by, there were constraints on the environment as a result of increase in the population and its consequent effects which forced the movement of parts of the villages to the water-logged areas in the Eastern part of the delta where fishing and salt mining were the immediate possible occupations that could support survival. (Alagoa, 1971:269-271) It was the exchange of the fishes and salt of the Eastern delta people with the farm produce of the Central delta communities that started the importance of the Niger Delta as a global trading region. That minimal internal trade gradually developed into inter-national trade when traders of the two delta regions launched outside to engage in a “Long Distance Trade” with other communities within the coastline areas and their hinterland neighbours. (ibid: 273) It was that early inter-national trade of the Niger Delta peoples that led to the development of trading states or city-states in the region. Alagoa maintained that the overseas trade of the Niger Delta peoples was an extension of their experiences in the international trade which he called “Long Distance Trade”.

When the Portuguese came to the Niger Delta in the 15th Century as mutual traders, their trade was anchored on already existing trading superstructures of the area. The next set of European traders was the Dutch who came in the 17th Century. They were followed by the French and English traders in the 18th Century. But one common deed of the groups was their quick recognition of the office of the Kings (Amanyababo) and lineage heads of the delta communities for better management of the “trust” system on which their trade with the delta peoples was based. The Kings as well as the lineage heads were the first beneficiaries of the trust system before their boys. But in all, the Kings were the general guarantors to all their subjects as the first logical direct contact with the overseas traders. (Alagoa, ibid) From that early contact, the delta trade was firmly incorporated into the global trade through the trans-Atlantic slave trade in early 16th Century. In the pre-European trade with their hinterland neighbours, the delta traders exchanged their fish and salt for great quantities of slaves, cows, goats, yams and other forest products. That elaborate trade exemplified the existence of well organized socio-economic structures which included government, well defined trade routes and social relations which the delta traders ably integrated into the trans-Atlantic trade.

In the Atlantic trade, the Europeans demanded for more slaves than the natural goods of the delta traders because that was more profitable. By that, the Mediterranean - Black Sea trade was brought closer to the delta region through the Portuguese who had established sugar plantations at Sao Tome which encouraged their high demand for slave labour from

the delta region. Later in 1580, when they extended their plantation enterprise to Brazil, the demand for African slaves increased. The Portuguese had the monopoly of supplying slaves to other Europeans like the Spaniards who had plantations in the Caribbean and other regions of the New World. Stationed at Sao Tome and Principe, the Portuguese got their slaves from the Niger Delta traders at Rio Real, the joint estuary of the New Calabar and Bonny Rivers. But that source was soon dried up of slaves because of the high demand for the commodity by the Europeans, forcing the delta traders to turn to their erstwhile hinterland partners, particularly the Igbo, to satisfy the Portuguese quests for slaves.

The major routes of the renewed slave drive passed through Igbo land and Ikwerre (in present day Rivers State). While the Western routes went from Onitsha and Awka, through Oguta, Owerri, Nkwere, Etche into Ikwerre and Ogoni land, the Eastern route ran from central Igbo land and joined the Western route at Bende, passing through Umuahia, Aba Ngwa, Omuma and Akwete, terminating at Ndoki and Ogoni land. It was the involvement of Aro traders in the trade, through their Long Juju (*Ibini Ukpabi*) Oracle that facilitated the organization and procurement of the slaves that were sold to the Niger Delta middlemen who, in turn, re-sold them to the Europeans at the ports.

After many centuries when other European powers besides the Portuguese, had made timeless fortunes from the trade and discovered it had become unprofitable to their local economies, they abolished it and waged unrelenting war with slave dealers everywhere in the world to see a total stop to it. They replaced the slave trade with a new trade in sylvan products, especially palm oil and its allied products that served as lubricants to the machines of the expanding industrialization in Europe. Again, Europe turned to the Niger Delta region for the articles of the new trade and to sell the finished goods of their factories. The new trade was code named "Legitimate Commerce."

However, while in the slave trade days the Europeans accepted the leadership and protection of the delta traders, in the legitimate commerce they were anxious to displace the delta middlemen and dictate the pace of the trade. That ambition drew the middlemen against the Europeans and led to the destruction of the economic and political fortunes of the middlemen, leading to the introduction of Western capitalist imperialism in the economy of the people. The development introduced the signing of trade treaties and paying of compensation to delta chiefs who accepted to give up the more profitable slave trade for the new legitimate commerce. The treaties were made possible by the establishment of a consulate at Fernando Po by the British government to enforce a full end to the slave trade. But the treaties soon turned an avenue for the Consul to interfere directly with the economic and political affairs of the delta people, giving opportunity to the European traders to dominate trade in the entire region. Indigenous systems and values were comprehensively eroded as Christianity swept over the region and its religious beliefs. The new turn of events often encouraged bitter competition among the delta communities as they allied against one another for better trade deals with the foreign traders. For example, Kalabari and Obolo (Andoni) allied against Bonny which they saw as holding monopolistic advantage of the Eastern delta trade. Also, Okrika often allied with Bonny or Nembe (Brass) against the Kalabari. (Ejituwu, 2002:283) Such bloody alliances pleased the Europeans because they helped their trade interest. Ejituwu (2002) noted that these consequences of the legitimate commerce hastened the speedy penetration of the hinterland by the European traders. With the founding of Port Harcourt in 1913, Western imperialism and colonialism had reached their apogee in the delta region as Britain had secured protection rights over the people in the 1884/1885 Berlin Conference. That success guaranteed the Europeans unchallenged access into the once highly prized hinterland markets of the delta traders.



On the whole, trade in the Niger Delta helped to expedite the integration of Nigeria into the global economy with the construction of railways and motor-able roads as new means of transportation from the hinterland communities where raw materials were procured to the new centres of trade like Port Harcourt and Lokoja which were close to the big rivers and Atlantic Ocean. The development made it easier for the raw materials to be moved out to Europe as well as bring in European finished goods for wider distribution in the remotest areas of Nigeria.

### **Discovery and Exploration of Crude Oil in the Niger Delta and its Impact**

By the time the story of crude oil began in Nigeria, the country was a full British colony with all manner of English capitalists scrambling for fortune in the different regions of the young country. But it was not until 1938 that a Dutch oil company, Shell-d'Archy Petroleum Company of Nigeria, a subsidiary of Shell Petroleum Company and British Petroleum Company, was granted the first mineral oil concession by the British colonial government. The Company immediately commenced geological and geophysical tests but the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939 halted its operations. (Nwankwo, 1982:12) Though other oil companies like Mobil Exploration Nigeria, a subsidiary of Socony-Mobil Oil Company of USA; SAFRAP, a French company, AGIP, Philips, Tenneco, Delta/ Pan Ocean, Japanese Petroleum, Occidental, Ashland, and many others, joined in the rush for oil in the Niger Delta in 1955, it was Shell - d'Archy Petroleum that first struck oil well at Olobiri, a village in Ogbia town in today's Bayelsa State, in 1957.

The Company exported its first Nigerian oil in 1959. With the exploration works of other oil companies, Nigeria's total oil revenue in foreign exchange rose above 80 per cent. Till date, there is no other region in Nigeria where oil is mined besides the Niger Delta. But the delta region has nothing much to show for that huge contribution to the nation's economy. After the discovery of oil in the delta region, agriculture which had been the main stay of the country's economy was abandoned, resulting to the total dependence of every section of Nigeria on oil. In the colonial days, for instance, each region of the country produced different crops in the spirit of comparative advantage.

According to Nwankwo (1982:11) before Nigeria was declared a major oil producer in 1973, principal agricultural products such as cocoa, palm produce and groundnuts flourished through regional specialization of production. Northern Nigeria featured prominently in groundnut production, Eastern Nigeria was noted for palm produce production, while Western Nigeria excelled in cocoa production. Nwankwo maintained that the export value of these products was 70-80 per cent in foreign exchange. Apart from these export crops, the domestic food needs of the country were virtually satisfied with the encouraged cultivation of cassava, rice, millet, yam, beans, vegetables, et cetera. Though that agricultural economy was structured to satisfy the imperial needs of the colonialists, abandoning it for oil even after independence, as the sole sustainer of Nigeria's economy, has remained a deteriorating sore on the country. With the divide and rule tendencies of the capitalist multinational companies that control the oil industry in Nigeria, the troubles created by oil in the country became too complex without solutions in sight.

In Nwankwo (1982), Offiong (2007), and Odeke (2020), it was stated that capitalism is invariably exploitative, making a few people richer while subjecting vast masses of the people to hardship. It cares not about the deplorable conditions of any people or their agony under its fetters as long as profits are coming. It was this abuse of the humanity of the Niger Delta peoples that informed their fear which compelled the British Parliament to set up a Commission of Enquiry in 1957 to look into the fears of the minorities in Nigeria and suggest means of allaying them. The findings and final report of the Commission were too ambiguous and misleading to serve the needs of the Niger Delta people, resulting to fresh

agitations for self-determination and control of the resources in their region. The political juggling of the region from the Niger Province, etc, to Eastern Region where the Igbo dominated, until 1967 when some States were created by the military for the Niger Delta peoples as a way of destabilizing the secessionist Biafra, failed to answer the question of the people. The development seemed satisfactory on the surface but was soon discovered to be a form of internal colonialism which served the economic quest of the North that controlled the federal military government who quickly took control of the collection and distribution of oil revenues, established through Decrees No. 51 of 1969 and No.9 of 1971. Subsequently, the revenue accruing to the Niger Delta was reduced from 50 per cent in 1966 to 1.5 per cent in the 1990s.

The introduction by the military of the new sharing formula of revenues based on contributions of States to the federal purse as well as the Distribution Pool Account (DPA) or federation account which based revenue allocation on population size, against revenue derivation, favoured only those States with higher population sizes to the disadvantage of Niger Delta States. The people saw the arrangement as an injustice against them. Considering their many decades of suffering neglect and marginalization despite the fact that the oil revenue shared against them derive from their region, they called for the restructuring of the country, a call generally referred to as a quest for resource control. The call was never heard by anybody until May, 1999 when Nigeria was returned to democratic rule before the derivation principle was increased to 13 per cent, in response to international campaigns and local protests. That measure was targeted at silencing the protesters and to co-opt their leadership into creating enabling conditions for the operations of oil companies.

The militarization of the Niger Delta agitation stemmed from the people's perception that democracy has not addressed their suffering under abject poverty conditions. But the militarization process was made possible, first by politicians who armed the youths to win elections on the promise that their victories would bring an end to the Niger Delta dilemma. The politicians failed in their vow and the agony of the people kept rising in the face of the sophistication and attraction in the products of modern globalization. The inequity in the sharing of oil wealth was a major source of divergence in the 2005 National Constitution Reform Conference where Northern and Southern delegates could not agree on true federalism for Nigeria, and the demand by Niger Delta delegates for an upward review of the derivation formula from 13 per cent to 25 per cent with a progressive increase within five years to 50 per cent was rejected. The final report of that Conference has been kept away from the public by the federal government, raising the anxiety and frustration of the Niger Delta people and helping their demand for the decentralization of the federal might, the granting of local autonomy and resource control by areas that produce the resources. Considering the poor human conditions in the Niger Delta where over 80 per cent of Nigeria's revenue comes from and the age long neglect of their calls for a redress, many are constrained to wonder whether oil is truly a curse to the people of the Niger Delta. (Obayiuwa, Williams, 2012: 10-22)

## CONCLUSIONS

The actual earlier home where the Niger Delta peoples migrated from to their present homes is still an issue for debates. It is safer therefore, to classify them among the peoples of hoar antiquities since they can no longer remember their earlier homes. (Alagoa, 1980:58) Notwithstanding, the history of the region is eventful not just contemporarily as the hot bed of oil politics in Nigeria but as a major trading centre to both indigenous and foreign traders since the 15<sup>th</sup> Century when the Portuguese first arrived the area as mutual traders which launched the long distance (inter-national) trade of the people into the capitalist economy of the Western world. It was from that early trade contact that the same Portuguese introduced the

people into the trans-Atlantic trade in human beings who were seized forcefully from their hinterland communities and sold to the Portuguese and other Europeans. These Europeans in turn, shipped those sold to them as slaves to the Americas and Europe where they completely lost their humanity to the service of those that purchased them.

In the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century when the slave trade had become irrelevant to the English economy, particularly Britain, it was abolished for a legitimate trade or commerce in palm produce and other forest goods produced in the hinterland communities. Again, the Niger Delta region served as the most important centre for the new trade in the West African coast because of the availability of palm produce supplies that satisfied the high demand of the foreign traders. Later the expanding industrial revolution in Europe from the proceeds of their African trade encouraged the formation of multinational corporations that subsequently explored and exploited crude oil (Middleton, 2007) in the Niger Delta until the independence of Nigeria in 1960. The new Nigerian government inherited all the colonial structures from the displaced colonial government whose tendencies were the underdevelopment of the people of the Niger Delta. The protests of the people since the colonial days for answers to their predicament have received no proper attention.

The Nigerian government's sharing formula of the oil proceeds from the region is considered an unjust formula by the people, which encourage endless restiveness in the region. Many conclude that oil is a curse to the Niger Delta region rather than the blessing it avails other regions that simply depend on its revenue. This is because the system of administration in Nigeria is akin to the European capitalist colonial system which ensures more wealth to the wealthy and increased poverty to the poor lots. (Nwankwo, 1982:7) The call to restructure Nigeria to a true federation by the delta people is unheeded because that may be the solution to their precarious situation.

## REFERENCES

1. Afigbo, A.E. (1980), "Igbo People Before 1800" in Ikime O (ed.), *Groundwork of Nigerian History*, Ibadan: Heinemann Educational Books (Nigeria) Limited
2. Alagoa, E.J. (1970), "Long Distance Trade and States in Niger Delta," *Journal African History*, Vol. xi. No. 3. 319 - 329
3. Alagoa, E.J. (1971), "The Development of Institutions in the States of the Eastern Niger Delta," *Journal of African History*, Vol. xii. No. 2. 269 – 278
4. Alagoa, E.J.(1980), "Peoples of the Cross River Valley and the Eastern Niger Delta," in Ikime O. (ed), *Groundwork of Nigerian History*, Ibadan: Heineman Educational Books (Nigeria) Limited
5. Austen, R. A. (1987), *African Economic History*, London: Heinemann Educational Books Inc.
6. Cookey, S. J. S. (1973), *King Jaja of the Niger Delta: His Life and Times, 1821-1891*, New York, NY: NOK Publishers Ltd
7. Crowder, M. (1976), *The Story of Nigeria*. London: Faber and Faber
8. Derefaka, A. A. (1997), "Archaeological Research in the Niger Delta: Results, Problems and
9. Prospects" in Ejituwu N C (ed), *The Multi- Disciplinary Approach to African History*" Port Harcourt: University of Port Harcourt Press

10. Dike, K. O. (1956), *Trade and Politics in the Niger Delta, 1830-1850*. Oxford: Clarendon Press
11. Ejituwu, N. C. (2004), *Thesis, Antithesis, Synthesis: Niger Delta Historiography in Time*
12. *Perspective (36<sup>th</sup> Inaugural Lecture of the University of Port Harcourt)*, Port Harcourt: University of Port Harcourt Press
13. Ejituwu, N. C. (2002), "Trade and Politics of the Peoples of Eastern Niger Delta" in Alagoa E J
14. and Derefaka, A. A. (eds.), *The Land and People of Rivers State: Eastern Niger Delta*. Port Harcourt: University of Port Harcourt Press
15. Hopkins, A. G. (1973), *An Economic History of West Africa*. London: Longman Group Ltd
16. Ikime, O. (1968), *Merchant Prince of the Niger Delta*. London: Heinemman Educational Ltd
17. Imbua, D. L. (2012), *Slavery, Slave Trade and the African Diaspora*, Lagos: Serenity Publishers
18. Jones, G. I. (1963), *The Trading States of the Oil Rivers (A Study of Political Development in Eastern Nigeria)*. London: Oxford University Press
19. Middleton, P. (2007), *The End of Oil: The Gulf, Nigeria and Beyond*. London: Constable and Robinson Ltd.
20. Nwankwo, A. A. (1982), *After Oil, What Next? (Oil and Multinationals in Nigeria)*, Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishing Co. Ltd
21. Obayiuwa, O. (January, 2012), "The Rape of Paradise," *New African magazine*
22. Odeke, F. C. (2020), *Globalization in Africa (A Short Illustration of an Obstruction to Growth)*,
23. Abakaliki: Emmygraphics Media Limited
24. Offiong, D. A. (2001), *Globalization: Post – Neodependency and Poverty in Africa*, Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishing Co.
25. Ofonagoro, W. I. (1979), *Trade and Imperialism in Southern Nigeria, 1881 -1929*, New York, NY: NOK Publishers International
26. Otto, G. (2000), *Abua in Socio- Economic Perspective*, Port Harcourt: Emhai Printing and Publishing Co.
27. *Report of the Commission of Enquiry into the Fears of the Minorities and the Means of Allaying Them*. July 30th, 1958. London
28. Stride, G. T. and Ifeka, C. (1971), *Peoples and Empires of West Africa (West Africa in History, 1000 -1800*, Ikeja, Lagos: Thomas Nelson (Nigeria) Ltd.
29. Williams, S. (January, 2012), "Oil Boom, A peoples' Doom," *New African magazine*