

Ethnic Diversity and Conflict in Africa. Case Study: the Niger Delta of Nigeria

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Abstract:

Since Africa has attained independence, the continent has witnessed many conflicts that are catalogued as ethnic. Many observers have seen these outbursts of violence as an outcome of its colonial past that has amplified the separation and competition between ethnic groups because of the "divide and rule" policy. Nigeria, which is the "economic giant of Africa" thanks to its oil resources, is also an immense trafficking area that the elites have pillaged without measure, making this oil-producing country a condensed of the continent's evils, between dictatorship, and ethnic antagonisms. This Federal Republic; composed of 36 states, is the most populous country with 140 million inhabitants according to the 2006 census, and one of the largest in the continent, with 923,768 km. Its population is very heterogeneous, with 450 languages and 250 communities belonging to four main ethnic groups: Hausa and Peul settled in the north, Yoruba (south-west) and Ibos (south-east). Political rivalries between the three major ethnic blocs, Yoruba, Peul-Hausa and Igbo, around the distribution of substantial oil revenues extracted from the Niger Delta region have resulted in violent intra-communal conflicts.

Key words: Ethnicity – Conflict – Africa – Nigeria – Niger Delta.

Résumé

Nombreux sont les conflits qui, depuis que l'Afrique a dans son ensemble, accédé à l'indépendance, ont été catalogués comme ethniques. Nombre d'observateurs ont vu dans ces explosions de violence un retour au passé colonial qui a amplifié la séparation et la concurrence entre les ethnies dans le cadre de la politique de «diviser pour mieux régner». Géant économique de l'Afrique, le Nigeria ; ex-colonie Britannique, est aussi un immense champ de trafics que ses élites ont pillé sans mesure, faisant de cette plate-forme pétrolière un condensé des maux du continent, entre dictature, et antagonismes ethniques. Composée de 36 États, cette république fédérale est le pays le plus peuplé - 140 millions d'habitants selon le recensement de 2006 - et l'un des plus vastes du continent, avec 923 768 km. Sa population est très hétérogène, comptant 450 langues et 250 communautés liées à 4 ethnies principales : Haoussas et Peuls établis au

nord, Yoroubas (sud-ouest) et Ibos (sud-est). Les rivalités politiques entre les trois grands blocs ethniques, Yoruba, Peul-Haoussa et Igbo, autour de la répartition des énormes subsides du pétrole extrait de la région du Delta du Niger ont résulté en violents conflits intra-communaux.

Introduction:

“Ethnicity is a social phenomenon associated with the identity of members of the largest possible competing communal groups (ethnic groups) seeking to protect and advance their interest in a political system. The relevant communal factor may be language, culture, race religion and/or common history. Ethnicity is only one of the phenomena associated with interactions among communal groups (ethnic groups). Others include trade, diplomacy, friendship enmity, corporation, self-abnegation and self-extension. What is peculiar to ethnicity is that it involves demands by one group on other competing groups” (O.Nnoli, 1978: 5).

Ethnicity in the words of Nnoli above shows that it does not yet exist until a demand is made by one group to seek for advantage and benefits for its group relative to what another group is seemingly enjoying. Similarly, according to Thomson, a basic definition of ethnicity is:

“... a community of people who have the conviction that they have a common identity and common fate based on issues of origin, kinship, ties, traditions, cultural uniqueness, a shared history and possibly a shared language. In this sense, an ethnic group is much like the imagined community of the nation. Ethnicity, however, focuses more on sentiments of origin and descent, rather than the geographical considerations of a nation” (A.Thomson, 2000: 60).

In sum, ethnicity is the deliberate and consciousness of tracing of one's identity to a particular ethnic group and allowing such feeling to determine the way one relates to people and things.

African countries today face greater challenges to peace and stability than ever before. The countries of sub-Saharan Africa, including Sierra-Leone, Ivory Coast, Liberia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, or Nigeria are a volatile mix of insecurity, instability, corrupt political institutions and poverty. The conflicts in these countries are mostly between ethnic groups. If not checked, ethnic conflicts are contagious

and can spread quickly across borders like cancer cells. Ted Gurr and Monty Marshall have written that most African conflicts are caused by the combination of poverty and weak states and institutions. (Peace and Conflict, 2001:11-13)

However, if we put things into context, in pre-colonial Africa the different ethnic groups lived separately and independently. These groups were not even aware of the existence of some other ethnic groups' feelings (Felicia H. Ayatse and Akuva, Isaac Iorhen, 2013: 181). This means that before the arrival of the colonial masters, the peoples who lived in sub-Saharan Africa were not in any serious conflict with any group hence, there was none to compete with around them. It becomes clear to say that; ethnicity was a deliberate and conscious creation of the colonial masters to use such sentimental expression to perpetually have dominion and control over the colonies in Africa.

Initially, in Nigeria, the different ethnics were living in small autonomous villages of 100 to 500 persons in different geographical locations without any problem of envying or being jealous of another ethnic hence their locations were far apart. For instance, the Hausa Yoruba and the Igbo's were far apart located that there was no need for chauvinistic feelings (Felicia H. Ayatse and Akuva, Isaac Iorhen, 2013: 181). It was the colonial masters who gradually gathered these ethnic entities in provinces, protectorates, regions and finally brought these different ethnics together into one geopolitical entity to be governed by one person using a common treasury.

In the Niger Delta Region, inter and intra ethnic conflicts have been rampant during colonial and post-colonial periods. Presently, these conflicts have hampered the unity and peaceful co-existence in the region. The issue of oil ethnic minorities' conflict in the Niger Delta could best be understood as part of a general problem caused by colonialism. This is due to the fact that "in Nigeria, the political circumstances, which propagate conflict, have been prevalent since colonial times" (E. E., Osaghae, E. Onwudiwe, and R.T. Suberu, 2002: 41).

In fact, in contemporary times, the people of the Niger Delta hold grievances, which are sources of political conflict in Nigeria that are rooted in colonialism. Foremost is that they found themselves as minority groups in the country in the administrative structures that were

established in the years before and after independence that marginalized them. Moreover, the region is still experiencing development problems, which they had envisaged prior to independence. This calls for the need to unearth the root cause of conflict in order to properly understand it.

1-The Niger Delta: Geography and Ethnicity:

The Niger Delta States



Source: GlobalSecurity.org

It should not be difficult to define the location of the Niger Delta on a map. However, due to political and economic reasons, there is some dispute among scholars as to the limits of the Niger Delta. Dike precisely described the location of the region:

“From Lagos to the Cameroons lies the low country of the Nigerian Coastal plain. The Niger Delta occupies the greater part of this lowland Belt and may be described as the region bounded by the Benin river on the west and the Cross river [and Imo river] in the east, including the Coastal area where the Cameroon mountain dip into the sea” (K.O. Dike, 1956:19). In terms of landmass, the total land area of the Region is approximately 25, 900 Km² or approximately 2.8 per cent of Nigeria's total land area

According to a recent study, political and economic considerations have interjected to raise the question: ‘what are the constituent parts of the Niger Delta?’. The controversy is such that a recent report surmises: ‘There is no consensus on the definition of the Niger Delta, even among the recognized spokesmen of the region’ (International IDEA: 142).

Thus, divergent views on the question still exist. Some people, for instance, define the Niger Delta as the six states of the so-called south-south zone of Nigeria, namely Akwalbom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo, and Rivers States. This generally coincides with the geographical definition of the region. Others make a distinction between the 'core' and the 'peripheral' Niger Delta. The 'core' Niger Delta are said to be, in order of importance, Rivers, Delta, Bayelsa, and, to some extent, Akwa thorn, States; the periphery comprises Ondo, Anambra, Edo, Cross River, and Imo, States. Commenting on such definitions, a recent report pertinently said:

“In recent decades, the definition of the Niger Delta has been bedevilled by politics. This was not so before the ascendancy of crude oil in the Nigerian economy. In the colonial and early independence periods, the Niger Delta was more or less coterminous with Ahoada, Degema, Opobo, Ogoni, Brass, Western Ijaw and Warn Divisions.”

Since the oil boom era of the early 1970s, the definition of the Niger Delta, which has tended to connote some proprietary rights over the oil wealth, has become highly politicised. Political boundaries started to have great significance because of their importance in determining which States and local government fall among the 'oil producing areas' of Nigeria with all its implications for revenue sharing. At various times in the recent political history of Nigeria, disputes over the oil wealth have led to agitation for boundary adjustments between States and for the creation of local governments even within the States in the Delta region.

The Niger Delta region comprises 185 Local Government Areas (LGAs) that are divided into more than 2,000 communities (AkachiOdoemene, 2011: 124). Also, it has a plethora of minority ethnic groups with a population of over 40million people. The area accounts for more than 23% of Nigeria's total population, and has one of the highest population densities in the world, with 265 people per square kilometre (AkachiOdoemene, 2011: 124). The ethnic groups in the region have settled there over many millennia. Some of the people in the Niger Delta, defined by the primary language spoken, were roughly estimated in a 2005 census to be: Ijaws 10,779,000; Isoko/Urhobo 4,546,000; Itsekiri 510,000; Ogoni 500,000; Ukawni

1,550,000; Kalabiri 2, 456, 00; Obolos 956, 877, 00; Ibibio 3,566,000 and Igbo 3,577,000 (National Public Record Office, 2005).

In contemporary times, the people of the Niger Delta hold grievances, which are sources of political conflict in Nigeria and that, are rooted in colonialism. Foremost is that they found themselves as minority groups in the country in the administrative structures that were established in the years before and after independence that marginalized them. The history behind contemporary conflict in the Niger Delta is therefore not limited to the economic aspects but also to the ethnic policy that was first imposed by the British than continued by post-independence rulers. Colonialism could be then considered as a root cause of contemporary political conflict in the Niger Delta.

2-Birth of Nigeria and the Creation of the Niger Delta: A Historical Account:

Map of Nigeria



Nowadays, Nigeria is usually described as one of the most deeply divided states in Africa (E. OsaghaeEghosa and T. SuberuRotimi, 2005: 4). Since it obtained its independence from Great Britain on October 1st 1960, Nigeria has suffered one socio-political crisis or the other, including a civil war that lasted for about four years between 1966 and 1970. Omeje attributed this to a: “Very little effort at political, administrative, social, economic and cultural integration during colonial history. Primordial ethnic structures and cleavages have largely been

the basis of national politics before and after independence” (NdubuisiNdubechukwuNwokolo, 2012: 117).

2.1. Pre-Colonial and Colonial Nigeria:

Nigeria as a whole comprises more than 250 ethnic groups, including three dominant tribes that are the Hausa and the Fulani , the Yoruba , and the Igbo, in addition to larger minority tribes that are the Ijaw , the Kanuri , the Efike-Ibibio , the Tiv ,the Edo ,the Nupe , and the Bura, and further small groups. Prior to British colonialism, many of these ethnic groups had established independent kingdoms and developed sophisticated governance structures.

In the southern territories that were to become the Delta Region in modern times. The various peoples of Southern Nigeria were politically, socially and economically organized for at least four centuries. Politically, each of them was independent of the others and had all the apparatus of governments which enabled it to maintain law and order, administer justice, make war and peace, and organize and prosecute peaceful commerce. In modern times they would be described as States; in fact, they have been described as 'city-states'.

By the mid-nineteenth century, the arrival of European slave traders and Christian missionaries exposed inhabitants of the southern territories to European culture (Bevan: 1999). After the slave trade ban in 1807, pre-colonial British exploitation of Nigeria shifted away from trade in humans to trade in cotton, industrial raw materials, palm oil and palm kernel. It was from the palm oil trade that the Niger Delta got its original name of 'Oil Rivers'.

The rise in the importance of palm oil produce in Europe contributed to the expansion of the existing trade in palm oil with the Niger Delta contributing to the bulk of palm oil. From 1830 onwards, the frontier of commercial opportunities gradually shifted from the coast to the Nigerian hinterland after the European discovery that the Niger River entered the Bight of Benin. This discovery, along with the invention of steamships and the use of quinine as an antidote for malaria facilitated the penetration of the Nigerian interior by traders and missionaries, thereby paving the way for British colonization of this area (J.S. Coleman, 1971: 40-42).

British control of Nigeria started in 1861 with the annexation of Lagos as a crown colony, initially placed under the direct control of the Governor of the Gold Coast until 1886 when it became a separate crown colony. The Berlin Conference (1884-1885) acknowledged British claims over the Niger Delta and paved the way for the establishment of the Oil Rivers Protectorate in 1885. The expansion of British interests into the interior after 1885 led to the formal extension of British control over western and eastern Nigeria, which were incorporated into the renamed Niger Coast Protectorate in 1893 (J.S. Coleman, 1971: 41-42).

The Niger Coast Protectorate was controlled and administered on behalf of Britain by the Royal Niger Company which was granted a Royal Charter in 1886 "to administer, make treaties, levy customs and trade in all territories in the basin of the Niger and its affluent" (M. Perham, 1973: 3). Yet, the charter of the Royal Niger Company was revoked in 1900 and the Niger Coast Protectorate, renamed Southern Nigeria, along with the Lagos Colony was placed under direct control of London. In 1906 those two regions were combined into the Colony and Protectorate of Southern Nigeria, and on the 1st of January 1900 Britain's "creeping" colonization of Nigeria culminated with the establishment of the Protectorate of Northern Nigeria.

According to M. Crowder, the period from 1906 to 1912 was one of the most crucial in Nigerian history since it marked both the beginning of effective British administration in the territory and the onset of the rejection of traditional standards and customs that had been in place for centuries (M. Crowder, 1966: 232-233). Despite the fact that Britain emphasised on the humanitarian aspects of its colonial endeavours in Nigeria, which were strongly influenced by the then prevailing Social Darwinist perceptions of European superiority and African savagery, the primary focus of the British in the early phase of Nigerian colonialism was economic.

The decision to unify Northern and Southern Nigeria dates back to 1911 when logistical difficulties in the construction of a railway line between Baro and Kano emphasized the need for greater political co-operation between the two Nigerias. The financial benefits of unification were also an important motivation for Britain since it was hoped that the financially prosperous Southern Nigeria that had a

record of annual surpluses (David Bevan, Paul Collier and Willem Gunning, 1999:10) would be able to relieve the Imperial Treasury from the burden of making annual grants to Northern Nigeria that had annual budget deficits (David Bevan, Paul Collier and Willem Gunning, 1999:10). The amalgamation process then began in 1912 with the appointment of Sir Frederick Lugard as governor of both Northern and Southern Nigeria

Amalgamation came into effect on 1 January 1914 with the proclamation of the Colony and Protectorate of Nigeria (A.N. Cook, 1964: 191-193), irrespective of existing traditional governance structures and ethno cultural boundaries (Maria Sophia Steyn: 73-74). After the creation of Nigeria in 1914, the various ethnic groups in Southern regions of Nigeria, which had been merged together, largely retained their independence under a native administration. Maier describes the birth of the modern Nigerian state as: "Nigeria, like other modern African states with the exception of Ethiopia, was the bastard child of imperialism, its rich mosaic peoples locked into a nation-state they had no part in designing (Maier, 2002: 7).

The new colonial political structure of Nigeria was divided into two separate spheres, which loosely traced the borders of the previous territories of Northern and Southern Nigeria. These new spheres were titled the Northern and Southern Provinces and were each headed by a Lieutenant-Governor.

The British colonizers ruled Nigeria through a system of indirect control. Under this system existing traditional governance structures were used as mechanisms through which decisions were implemented and enforced. Unwittingly, this system developed two challenges to the future of a unified political authority: first, the system enhanced traditional authority, which would undermine attempts to centralize power in the years to come; and second, the reinforcement of traditional governance structures based on ethnic cleavages, that is defined as the policy of "divide and rule", and that contributed to limited levels of association with Nigerian national identity and the federal state (Sarah Ahmed Khan, 1994: 06).

In the Niger Delta region, the British employed variations of indirect rule in south-western and south-eastern Nigeria. Lagos retained its status as British colony until 1951 with its inhabitants considered as

British subjects who owed allegiance to the British crown. In the western parts of Southern Nigeria, the kings of the Yoruba and Edo states continued to rule over their subjects, but under the supervision of British administrators.

Indirect rule system, then, ensured that the people governed themselves. In the result, there was no distinction between the various peoples into majorities and minorities. This position remained until regionalisation process began in the 1940s. In other words, 'ethnic minorities' did not become a part of the political vocabulary in Nigeria until after the process of regionalisation was begun in the mid-1940s' (Cyril I.Obi, 2001:18).

The regionalisation policy, which started with the setting up of regional legislatures under the 1946 constitution, was finally institutionalised by the adoption of a federal constitution in 1954. By 1946, demands for increased representation by ethnic groups resulted in a modification to the constitution that created three regions: the northern region, which was predominantly Hausa-Fulani; the western region based around the Yoruba tribe; and the eastern region with an Igbo majority (Oronto Douglas and Ike Okonta :12).

To put it into context, the onset of colonial rule in Nigeria coincided with the expansion of oil exploration to many areas of the world. The development of the combustion engine in the 1890's opened up new uses for oil and other lubricant based products. With increasing reliance on mechanised industry, the British government concluded that the satisfaction of oil demand had to come from areas of the globe that may potentially hold oil reserves. The first of which to "rightfully" explore were their colonies. Nigeria, being one of those colonies was explored first for bitumen, coal and oil. Several explorative ventures occurred between 1903-1935, but it was in 1956 that the first oil well was struck in commercial quantities at Oloibiri in Bayelsa State in the Niger Delta. The first oil field began production in 1958.

The discovery of oil in Nigeria catapulted the country into the international oil dealings. The petroleum industry in Nigeria is the largest on the African continent. As of 2016, Nigeria's petroleum industry contributes about 90% to its economy. According to the International Energy Agency, Nigeria produced about 2.53 million

barrels (402,000 m³) per day, well below its oil production capacity of over 3 million barrels (480,000 m³) per day, in 2011.

The period of the 1950's was also extremely significant in the broader Nigerian context. The creation of three regional administrative divisions along majority ethnic lines, the Hausa Fulani of the north, Igbos of the east and Yorubas of the west, vast ethnic minorities in the central south of Nigeria, particularly the Ijaws were excluded from mainstream majority agendas. Tensions grew as the people of the Niger Delta were not able to participate with the major groups which lead to significantly reduced economic, political and social opportunity which in turn lead to resentment of inequality among ethnic groups.

It is to highlight that the 1950s marked a period of decolonisation in Nigeria culminating in the attainment of political independence on October 1, 1960. This decade witnessed the convening of constitutional conferences in Nigeria and Britain before each constitutional reform was promulgated. These conferences were characterised by divisive tendencies based on ethnic and regional rivalries. The division of Nigeria into three main administrative regions, north, east and west – each of which was dominated by a majority ethnic group as stated above, as well as the colonial policy of divide and rule, helped to accentuate ethnic rivalries in Nigeria in general and the Niger Delta in particular.

The dominance of each region by a majority ethnic group resulted in a situation where the constitutional conferences were dominated by decisive issues that would favour each region and its dominant ethnic group as opposed to issues of national interest. Thus, the contentious issues at the 1950, 1951, 1953, 1954, 1957 and 1958 constitutional conferences included the percentage of representation of each region in the central legislature, revenue allocation, the status of Lagos, agitation for state creation by ethnic minorities and the date for Nigeria's political independence. The 1954 constitution firmly entrenched federalism and regionalism in Nigeria and instituted the fiscal base of the region through the regionalization of the marketing boards. This constitution established the institutional framework on which the independence constitution was based.

Consequently, colonial patterns of social formation accentuated and hardened ethnic differences in the Niger Delta region and ethnic

minorities had become more determined in their demand for the creation of more states .The issue of states creation was raised at the 1954 constitutional conference ,but was not addressed because it was not included in the conference's agenda. Thus, the 1954 constitutional conference which granted greater power to regional authorities dominated by the respective majority ethnic groups, accentuated the agitation of the ethnic minorities (Kevin Shellington, 2005:1108).

As a result, by 4 July 1954, the Rivers chiefs made the People's Conference to call for the emancipation of the Niger Delta minorities. This later got an initiation from the Colonial Office in London to represent its case in the 1957 London constitutional conference .However, the minorities' hopes were dashed as the conference, rather than accede to their demands for a separate state, decided to refer them to a special commission headed by Sir Henry Willink to look into their agitations (J.SholaOmotola, 2009:132).The Willink commission, also known as the Minorities Commission, was charged with asserting the facts about fears of minorities in any part of Nigeria, and to propose means of allaying the fears as well as recommending safeguards against the mistreatment of minorities to be included in the constitution (Kevin Shellington:1108).

The commission found evidence of dominion and other problems alleged by minorities and acknowledged their fears, and observed in the Willink Commission Report of 1958 that:

"...the need of those who live in the creeks and swamps of the Niger Delta are very different from those of the interior...it is not easy for a government or legislature operating from inland to concern itself or even fully understand the problems of a territory where communications are so difficult, building so expensive and education so scanty in a country which is unlikely ever to be developed (H. Willink, G Hadow, P. Mason and J.B.:51)".

The commission concluded:

"...we had no doubt that a feeling of neglect and a lack of understanding was widespread in both Regions (Western and Eastern Delta). We consider that a case has been made out for special treatment of this area. This is a matter that requires special effort because it is poor, backward and neglected".

The Minority Commission also found that the Eastern minorities were aggrieved about the extensive influence of the Igbo in the region. From their everyday experiences of the conduct of government, the minorities feared that the Igbo autocracy would emerge in the region at independence, an autocracy that would have an Igbo-dominated civil service. The Eastern minorities particularly resented the economic dominance of the Igbo. There was also the apprehension that a lopsided post-independence economic system would emerge in which the Igbo, on account of their demographic majority and control of the organs of regional government, controlled key socio-economic resources.

The Willink commission could only make detailed recommendations for the creation of new states if no other solution could be found. It is clear that the colonial administration was reluctant to create any new states in Nigeria. Moreover, among the major proposals submitted to the Willink Commission was the dismantling of the regional system of government and the adoption of a federal system, in which there would be "smaller states within what is now the Eastern region" (H. Willink, G. Hadow, P. Mason and J.B. Shearer: 47).

Interestingly, the commission did not view majority/minority relations as fundamental to Nigeria's problems, and thus did not approve the creation of new states to allay the fears of the minorities. Nevertheless, the Commission recommended the creation of an Advisory Council for certain minorities or clusters of minorities. This council would advise the government on the socio-economic well-being of the areas concerned as well as "bring to the notice of Regional Government any discrimination against the Area".

The 1950 national conference, followed by the other consultations in 1953, 1954, 1957 and 1959, were intended to perfect the practice of federalism in independent Nigeria. An important feature of these Constitutions was the extensive powers granted to the regions, making them effectively autonomous entities and a revenue arrangement, which ensured that the regions had the resources to carry out the immense responsibilities of governance. Under these constitutions, a federal system was set up in Nigeria, made up of strong regions and a central government with limited powers.

The issue of revenue allocation was contentious in the 1950s, and remained so in post-colonial Nigeria due to the growing importance of

oil revenues engendered from the Niger Delta region since before independence. From 1946 the introduction of any new constitution was accomplished by a review of the revenue allocation formula. The first revenue allocation commission was the Phillipson- Adebo Commission of 1946, which accompanied the Richards constitution .The main disagreement between Nigerian politicians centred on the factors should be given more weight in allocating revenue .The south western region, and to some extent the south eastern region, placed more emphasis on derivation while the north favoured population and size as the most important factors.

The Hicks-Phillipson Commission of 1951 was the first to attempt to spell out the criteria on which revenue allocation should be based .The criteria included derivation, needs, national interest, population, and even development .It gave some weight to derivation by providing that 100 per cent of mineral rents and royalties be retained in the region from where the minerals were derived .The Chick Commission, which was set up with the introduction of the 1954 federal constitution and the Raisman Commission of 1958, essentially followed the formula laid down by the Hicks-Phillipson Commission. However, the percentage of mineral rents and royalties to be paid to their regions of origin was reduced to 50 per cent (Robert I. Rotberg; 91).

Interestingly, each region strove to have a dominant revenue-yielding product: the North had groundnut pyramids and cotton, the West had cocoa and rubber and the East had palm oil. Thus, the federal principle at this point was a basis for defining competition between the regions for social and economic progress in Nigeria(A. I.Moro, 2010:253). Yet, the exploration, discovery and exploitation of crude oil in the Niger Delta as a new source of economic revenue redesigned the economic profile of the country and resulted in new tensions in the Niger Delta region.

2.2. Current Geopolitical Structure:

Since independence, Nigeria has experienced three republics, five coups and a civil war, not to mention a severely battered economy. This, amongst others, helped to shape the various geopolitical changes that Nigeria has undergone since then. Omeje attributed this to: "...a very little effort at political, administrative, social, economic and cultural integration during colonial history.

Primordial ethnic structures and cleavages have largely been the basis of national politics before and after independence” (NdubuisiNdubechukwuNwokolo, 2013:116).

Under the first republic, between 1963 and 1966, Nigeria was run with three administrative units that reflected the three main geographical regions, the Northern Region of predominantly Hausa and Fulani ethnic groups; the Western Region mainly Yoruba and the Eastern Region of the Ibo. These ethnic divisions partly led to the Nigerian Civil War, also known as the Biafran War, which lasted from 1967 to 1970 and during which twelve states were established. Three military regimes and two coups later, the Second Republic was underway but for a short period between 1979 and 1983. By this time, the number of states had increased to nineteen. An additional two states were created in 1987 and the Federal Territory moved from Lagos to Abuja officially in 1991. After two separate state creation exercises, Nigeria now has 36 states and is currently in its Fourth republic.

The oil-rich Nigerian economy has been long hobbled by political instability, corruption, and poor macroeconomic management. Nigeria's former military rulers failed to diversify the economy away from overdependence on the capital-intensive oil sector. In all, the military has held power for 29 years of the 57 years since independence. Corruption is a very serious problem in Nigeria today and there is still much debate as to who has been more corrupt in the past, the military or democratic politicians. Civilians have also been blamed for mismanaging the economy and the value of the Naira, Nigeria's local currency, has been steadily on a decline.

As one of the leading oil producers in the world, Nigeria has been a member of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) since 1971. The largely subsistence agricultural sector has failed to keep up with rapid population growth, and Nigeria, once a large net exporter of food, must now import food. However, more attention will have to be paid to non-oil exports if any growth in the economy is to be sustainable. Nigeria is also an active member of the U.N, the Commonwealth of Nations and the Organization of African Unity, O.A.U. It also stands as the headquarters for the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the regional body of West African nations.

As noted earlier, ethnic, religious and geographical boundaries dissect the Nigerian political scene, and the boundaries have overlaid immense oil wealth in the Niger Delta. Despite their differences, the regions share the common elements of poverty, identity, corruption, crime and frustration. It is not surprising, therefore, that when frustrations do boil over they take ethnic dimensions. As a result of years of Nigeria's ethnically based policy, ethnic identity has become deeply entrenched and politicized. Incidences of inter-communal conflict based on ethnic loyalties remain frequent. At the heart of these ethnic conflicts is the highly political issue of access to scarce resources.

Conclusion:

Whatever the historical justifications, conflicts are always and everywhere about access to scarce resources. This might be farmland, employment, or access to political power. It could even be jealousy over the provision of water or electricity to one village but not to its neighbour. At their root these differences are not cultural or religious. They are economic (BBC: 2000).

As such, ethnic conflict in the Niger Delta in Nigeria feeds on the perceived marginalization of communities from access to resources. The Institute for Peace and Conflict Resolution (IPCR) study on conflict in Nigeria indicates that one of the key causes of conflicts and challenges to governance in Nigeria is the state's dependence on oil and the Federal Government's role as the broker of oil wealth. The report asserts that: "The struggle for access to the nation's oil wealth has interacted with various political crises, notably very long periods of military rule, to produce a situation in which a large proportion of political activity is simply competition for resources" (Institute for Peace and Conflict Resolution, 2002: 64).

In playing its role as the broker of oil wealth, successive governments have used political office for personal gain, created new states and redraw political territorial boundaries (Institute for Peace and Conflict Resolution, 2002: 26). The benefits associated with oil production have also nourished inter and intra-communal conflicts within ethnic tribes in Nigeria, and particularly in the Niger Delta region.

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