Slow Death in the Niger Delta

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Where Vultures Feast: Shell, Human Rights, and Oil
by Ike Okonta and Oro

In order to understand the various ramifications of the Ogoni crisis, it is necessary to track how the combination of local and global political violence unleashed the peculiar brew that has transformed in ecological terms not only Ogoniland but the Niger Delta as a whole. It is the mix of local and global terror that created the volatile situation that affects the entire region. The expansion of capital, to a large extent, must be blamed for the various forms of destruction affecting the Niger Delta. We are often reminded that "the Niger Delta has substantial oil and gas reserves. Oil mined in the area accounts for 95 percent of the country's foreign exchange earnings and about one-fourth of Gross Domestic Product" (p. 18). It is necessary to provide various interpretations for political terror in relation to the crisis in the Niger Delta. In order to do so, I will address Ike Okonta and Oronto-Douglas's study of the ecological crisis in the Niger Delta and suggest ways in which it can be construed theoretically. I shall also address broader phenomenologies of political violence which their study does not completely foreground even though it provides excellent descriptions of gross governmental corruption and the duplicity of multinational capital.

In this instance, there are two main ways to imagine and interpret the kind of political violence one has in mind. The first will be to analyse the political violence caused by multinational capital and the second, the violence endangered by the postcolonial state. In this regard, Shell is the biggest oil corporation operating in the Niger Delta. Before the discovery of oil, we will recall that the region was the most significant palm oil exporting zone in Africa. The palm oil exporting business created an opportunity for the beginning of colonial relations that were essentially driven by the expansion of global capital. George Goldie Taubman, a British merchant, was instrumental to the making of modern Nigeria and we are informed that he "embarked on trading practices that cut off the once flourishing Delta ports from the outside world which plunged the populace into unprecedented penury from which it has never been able to recover" (p. 13).

When the indigenous traders of the region revolted against the economic blockage, "the Consul General of the newly established Niger Coast Protectorate sent a naval force to Nembe Creek, attacked the town, and razed it to the ground. Two thousand unarmed people, mostly women and children, were murdered" (p. 14). The point is, economic factors were the primary reasons for the British incursion and subjugation of the geographical space that came to be known as Nigeria. Indeed, "Nigeria was created by British merchants and soldiers of fortune primarily to serve the mother country's interests as nineteenth-century capitalism entered the stage of imperialism, and desired even more sources of cheap raw material and also new markets for its products" (p. 27).

The violence that began in the Niger Delta at the dawn of colonialism worsened in the postcolonial era when petroleum was discovered. As such "oil is the stuff of contemporary Nigerian politics, and the Niger Delta is the field on which the vicious battle to control this money spinner is waged. The civil war that raged between the breakaway Eastern Region and the rest of the country from July 1967 to January 1970 was not so much a war to maintain the unity and integrity of the country […] as a desperate gambit by the federal government to win back the oil fields of the Niger Delta from Biafra" (p. 24). This argument was also made by Ken Saro-Wiwa, the famous Nigerian author and environmentalist who was hanged alongside eight other Ogoni indigenes by the Abacha military junta. After the defeat of Biafra by the federal forces, a process of internal colonization commenced which has not been reversed.

This particular form of political violence was part of the strategy to maintain the "peripheral-capitalist structure of the economy" of Nigeria. Accordingly, the concept of the rentier state has been applied to the country:

> Terisa Turner has applied Ruth First's concept of the "Rentier State" to Nigeria's post-civil-war political economy, pointing out that the country is sustained not by what it produces, but on "rent" on production: here, the oil industry, where investments, production, marketing, and sundry expertise are completely dominated by multinational corporations that simply pay taxes and royalties to the state. Thus the entire state apparatus becomes a commodity for rent to the highest bidder, a bizarre bazaar presided over by a "commercial triangle" of state officials, local middlemen, and foreign suppliers. This group cannot thrive outside the state political economy, which partly explains the dizzying succession of military coups and electoral frauds the country has been afflicted with since independence. State power is everything, and to be without power is to be condemned to unremitting poverty" (p. 29).

As the oil based economy grew so did governmental corruption. As Okonta and Oronto-Douglas point out, "everybody wanted a piece of the action, not least British Aerospace, which concluded a controversial £22 million ($35 million) kickback deal with Nigerian government officials in order to secure a contract for the supply of eighteen Jaguar ground-attack fighters worth £300 million ($480 million). It was in fact the 'Jaguar deal' that finally pushed junior military officers to demand an end to the Second Republic and subsequently brought General Muhammadu Buhari to power after a military coup in December 1983" (p. 30). By the time, Buhari took over the reins of power, "twenty percent of the nation's oil was being smuggled out of the country" (p. 30). The IMF-imposed Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) did the rest of the economic damage. In the mid eighties, 44 percent of Nigeria's entire export earnings was being used to reduce its debt dependenc" (p. 30).

As the economic downturn continued, oil producing communities in the Niger Delta agitated for better treatment from the federal government and the multinational oil concerns. In response to these agitations, the Babangida regime set up an agency, the Oil Mineral Producing Areas Development Commission (OMPADEC) in 1993 "with the responsibility of monitoring and managing ecological problems associated with the production and exploitation activities of the oil companies. It was also expected to act as mediator between them and the communities when problems arose" (p. 33).

However, OMPADEC as an agency to improve the conditions in the oil producing areas was a woeful failure under both the Babangida and Abacha regimes. For instance, three years after it commenced operations, OMPADEC had committed itself to projects worth $500 million. Interestingly, the bulk of money paid out for projects "completed" was to contractors whose addresses could not be traced. When Eric Opia, head of the panel set up by the Abacha junta to probe Horsfall, was appointed Sole Administrator in his place, he proceeded to loot OMPADEC in an even more brazen fashion. By September 1998, when he was kicked out for "gross financial misappropriation," Opia had embezzled some $200 million set aside for the development of the impoverished communities of the Niger Delta (p. 35). Perhaps the failure of the agency is to be expected since it was not properly equipped to carry out its functions. A World Bank team that studied the workings of the agency in 1995 discovered that "(1) there was no emphasis on environmentally sustainable development; (2) the commission did not have the requisite personnel to enable it to meet its ecological mandate; (3) there was an absence of long-term planning; (4) there was little or no project assessment, and where projects were initiated, maintenance requirements were not built into them; and (5) there was no integrated approach to development planning, which should have involved the local communities and other government agencies in the area" (p. 35).

The problem of corruption was not just limited to OMPADEC. In fact, it had assumed national proportions and has not really subsided since then. Babangida started the practice of billion dollar embezzlements. The Pius Okigbo panel that looked into the (mis)use of funds that accrued to the national treasury as a result of the Gulf Oil crisis of 1990-91 revealed that "between September 1988 and June 1994, $ 12.2 billion of the $12.4 billion [in the dedicated accounts] was liquidated in less than six years…they were spent on what could neither be adjudged genuine high priority nor truly regenerative investment; neither the President nor the Central Bank Governor accounted to anyone for these massive extra-budgetary expenditures…" (pp. 36-37, citing Pius Okigbo). In view of this scale of brigandage, Okonta and Oronto-Douglas point out "the only legacy that Ibrahim Babangida bequeathed to Nigerians before he was removed from office was the democratization of corruption and the corruption of democracy" (pp. 36-37). There is certainly a lot of truth in this assessment. Sani Abacha was no better. In fact, in some ways he was worse. For example, at the time of his death in June 1998, Nigeria had over eight thousand prisoners in its prisons. Also, in less than five years, Abacha and his henchmen had looted $10 billion from the national treasury. General Abdulsalami Abubakar, who took over from Abacha and who handled over to the democratic dispensation of Olusegun Obasanjo, is also heavily tainted by the scourge of corruption. It is noted that "Abubakar awarded to himself, the disgraced former Head of State Ibrahim Babangida, and a handful of senior generals and business associates - including the ubiquitous Gilbert Chagouri - eleven oil exploration blocks and eight oil-lifting contracts worth billions of dollars. Then the generals turned their attention to the country's foreign reserves. In the short space of three months - between the end of December 1998 and the end of March 1999 - $2.7 billion had vanished from the national coffers" (p. 40).

So both the governments that set up organisations to address the problems of oil-producing regions as well as the organisations themselves were riddled with corruption. Even the Petroleum (Special) Task Force (PTF) that was established in 1995 with the supposedly upright Muhammadu Buhari, a former Head of State, at its helm has been "accused of nepotism and financial recklessness" (p. 38). Successive governments of Nigeria have generally not acted responsibly to its citizenry as a whole, let alone the oil-producing regions. In pursuing their narrow interests they have created criminal conditions of chaos and neglect in the Niger Delta. After the failures of OMPADEC and the PTF, the post-Abacha democratic dispensation set up the Niger Delta Development Commission to address the needs of the oil-producing communities just like its predecessors had done. It remains to be seen how successful this organisation would become. Indeed, it was set up within a context of extreme politicisation and strife so it is likely to be only more marginally successful that its predecessors.

Shell, the multinational oil company, does not have an enviable record in the Niger Delta and within human rights circles. For instance, it has been revealed that Shell collaborated with the apartheid regime in South Africa: "Shell's business interests in the country date back to the 1920s. The company has always maintained a cozy relationship with Afrikaner merchants in South Africa. Today the conglomerate owns 50-percent stake in Abecol, asphalt manufacturing firm, and another 50-percent holding in the controversial Rietspruit open-cast mine in the Transvaal. Shell also owns over eight hundred gas stations in the country" (p. 48). It has also been pointed out that Shell's hands in the hanging of Ken Saro-Wiwa are not all together clean:

> It is the measure of how powerful Shell has become in Nigeria and the extent to which its business interests had merged with the designs of one of the most brutal and corrupt regimes in the world that Dr. Owens Wiwa, brother of the environmentalist, told journalists he had a meeting with the former managing director, Brian Anderson, in his home in Lagos in May 1995, and that Anderson said he could effect Ken Saro-Wiwa's release from detention but would only do so if MOSOP [Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People] called off its international campaign against his company (p. 48).

There are also policemen specially assigned to provide security for the company's operations in Nigeria. Their duties include providing administrative assistance, intelligence and surveillance operations and supervision of the armories (p. 49). This collaboration with armed personnel was evident in September 1993 when "over a thousand Ogoni were killed in the villages of Eaken, Gwara, and Kenwigbara. An estimated twenty thousand more were rendered homeless" (p. 125). In fact, it is claimed that Shell officials met with senior military men and security operatives over plans to exterminate the Ogoni.

The amount of damage the company's operations does to Nigeria is quite enormous. The Niger Delta used to be a region blessed with wildlife and it is claimed that "it has more freshwater fish species than any other coastal system in West Africa" (p. 63). Furthermore, "the World Bank has drawn attention to its importance as home to a great variety of threatened coastal and estuarine fauna and

flora, and to the need for preservation of the biodiversity of the area because of its rich biological resources" (p. 63). However, it is unlikely that the biodiversity of the region would be preserved due to fact that the company is "one of the biggest contributors to global warming" (p. 67). Indeed some of the damage already done cannot be undone: "approximately twenty-two square miles of mangrove has been cut by Shell in its Eastern division alone in the course of its seismic operations and a considerable amount of fauna and flora have been destroyed, expelled, or damaged beyond repair during the period" (p. 69). Bush pig, iguana, monkeys (some rare) have had to flee the destroyed and polluted forests. Some species have become extinct. Acid rains corrode not only zinc roofing but also contribute to the destruction of fauna and flora.

Creeks and swamps are not left out of the relentless assault:

> In the course of separating the oil from water, Shell officials use chemicals to induce settlement in the tanks. The end product of this separation process is thick, oily sludge which combines with firefighting chemicals like Halon, already in the tank, to form a potent mixture. This hazardous substance is then discharged into the swamps and rivers. The Bonny River estuary, the swamps around Forcados, and the Warri River near Ughelli, where Shell discharges its production water, have been contaminated after nearly four decades of receiving this cocktail of dissolved and dispersed hydrocarbons, sludge, and fighting agents (p. 87).

The above description gives a picture of what life is like in the rural areas. In major cities such as Port Harcourt, the politics of oil production has also affected the manner and quality of life as "the poor majority are banished to the sprawling waterfront slums and the other ghettos where there is no electricity, water supply, or sanitation facilities. Here also, refuse collection and dumping is inefficient and badly managed, and waste dumps have taken over whole streets, vying with human beings for space" (p. 192). Also, in cities such as Warri and Port Harcourt, "armed robbery, hooliganism, prostitution, and sudden, seemingly inexplicable explosions of street violence have become a way of life" (p. 192). Okonta and Douglas claim that Shell practices ecological racism, as the standards the company applies in Western nations are much better than what the Niger Delta receives.

In order to cover up the violence of its activities, Shell has had to resort to spin-doctoring. The authors write: "Shell has found common cause with the trinity of Andrew Neil, former editor of the London *Sunday Times*; Donu Kogbara, another journalist, who is, incidentally, Saro-Wiwa's niece; and Richard D. North, the ex-*Independent* journalist whose controversial book, *Life on a Modern Planet: A Manifesto for Progress*, is a battering ram of the resurgent right-wing attack on the environmental movement in the United Kingdom" (p. 172).

The book is a graphic account of how global capital in collaboration with local power unleashes terror on the poor, of how it destroys human beings and the environment and also how it erects elaborate mechanisms to hide the extent and gravity of its violence. It not only destroys human lives but constructs elaborate lies to conceal from history the extent of its destructive activities. Okonta and Douglas offer a vivid description of the modes of collaboration between Shell and the Nigerian ruling class in undermining important facets of Nigerian life. There are detailed explanations of instances of corruption and charges of ecological racism. A sentence sums up the main argument of the book: "the oil-producing minorities of the Niger Delta have become living carrion on which successive regimes in Nigeria and their foreign collaborators, like insatiable vultures, have feasted, are still feasting, without letup (p. 115).

On the whole, the book presents an angry and graphic picture of life being slowly destroyed in the Niger Delta without bothering to provide useful theoretical insights for more clues into the nature of this particular kind of structural and political violence. The nature of this kind of violence indeed has global dimensions and can be better understood via numerous critiques of neo-liberalism. Such necessary critiques of neo-liberalism are absent from the book. Okonta and Douglas write as activists and sometimes allow their anger to get the better of them. Nonetheless, their book remains one of the most engaging accounts of systematic ecological destruction available.