BACKGROUND PAPER: THE NIGER DELTA

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One of the great deltaic regions in the world, the Niger delta is a vast sedimentary basin constructed over time through successive thick layers of sediments dating back 40-50 million years to the Eocene epoch. One of the world’s largest deltas, the immense coastal plain covers almost 70,000 square kilometers. The Niger delta has been defined for a variety of political, ecological and geological purposes, but the conventional geographical perimeter extends from the Benin River in the west to the Imo River in the east, and from the southernmost tip at Palm Point near Akassa to Aboh in the north where the Niger River bifurcates into its two main tributaries. This area represents roughly 25,900 square kilometers, about 2.8% of the Nigeria land area. It is a classic arcuate delta, typically below the 15 meter contour across its entire extent.

The delta is endowed with very substantial hydrocarbon deposits. Crude oil production from the delta runs at almost 2 million barrels per day which accounts for roughly 90% of Nigerian export revenues. Nigeria is the largest producer of petroleum in Africa and is among the world’s top ten oil producers (and is a member of OPEC). In addition to its large non-renewable resource base, the Niger delta is home to the world’s third largest mangrove forest, the most extensive freshwater swamp forests in West and Central Africa, and the site of Nigeria’s remaining primary forest, including a high concentration of biodiversity and several centers of endemism.

The major drainage systems of the delta consist of seven discrete river systems which lie squarely in the wet equatorial climatic belt. Cloud cover is high, relative humidity always above 80%, and rain falls year round with the exception of a short dry spell in January and February. Soils are hydromorphic and poorly drained. There are few remaining areas of pristine vegetation and the contemporary biogeography is largely comprised of a mosaic of arable farmlands (cassava, maize, yams), tree crops (oil palm, rubber, cocoa, plantain), and patches of natural vegetation. The remaining natural vegetation includes lowland rainforest, freshwater swamps, tidal mangroves, saltmarsh and tidal mudflats, and coastal forest on the barrier sand ridges.

It is difficult to estimate the current population, but since the 1960s population has been growing at about 2.7% per annum and the population of Delta, Rivers and Bayelsa states (the administrative heart of the Niger delta) is in excess of 7 millions. The settlement pattern is largely nucleated and rural, typically occupying isolated dry sites within the deltaic swamps. Cities such as Warri and Port Harcourt are found inland where better drainage exits, located at the heads of navigable estuaries. The capital of the recently founded Bayelsa State (Yenagoa) has emerged as a boomtown over several hundred thousands seemingly overnight. Farming systems are predominantly peasant, characterised by small land parcels, short-fallow systems of cultivation, and diversified forms of rural livelihood including hunting and fishing.
The delta is a region of enormous ethnic and linguistic complexity. While there are five major linguistic categories (Ijoid, Yoruboid, Edoid, Igbo and Delta Cross), each embraces a profusion of ethno-linguistic communities (in excess of one hundred across the greater delta. The history of the Delta is in some respects captured in this linguistic and cultural complexity since pre-colonial trade across the region was linked to a social division of labor rooted in occupation and micro-ecology. Early European explorers commented upon the trans-deltaic trade networks, but these transactions were radically compromised by the Portuguese in the fifteenth century, and subsequently by the French, Dutch and British slavers. The rise of the so-called legitimate trade under British auspices in the nineteenth century – the rise of rubber and cocoa which displaced slavery after abolition – helped create an Oil Rivers Protectorate in which a vital commercial life flourished. The establishment of the Nigerian colony and the imposition of Indirect Rule, however, largely marginalized the multi-ethnic communities of the Delta. Indeed, in the transition to Independence in the 1950s, the so-called ethnic minorities voiced their concerns to the departing British that they were largely peripheral in a Nigerian federation dominated by three ethnic majorities (the Hausa, the Yoruba and the Ibo).

Curiously, the onset of commercial petroleum production in 1958 in the heart of the delta – discovered in Oloibiri in current Baylesa State – seemed to hold out the promise of rapid development for the ethnic minorities. But the presence of the transnational oil companies in joint-ventures with the Nigerian State (the Nigerian National Petroleum Company) instead produced enormous environmental despoliation and a crisis of forms of traditional livelihood. Oil has converted the Niger delta into what the European Union called “an ecological nightmare” - the highest gas flaring rates in the world, massive contamination of deltaic waterways, and over 4640 oil spills between 1976 and 1996 (totaling 3 million barrels). The ecological crisis in the delta is coupled with a deepening political-economic crisis. The oil producing states in Nigeria – all in the Niger delta - account for 90% of oil revenues yet they receive only 19% of the statutory revenues from the Federal government derived from petroleum sales. Not surprisingly, by the 1970s and 1980s, a number of ethnic communities had begun to mobilize against the so-called “slick alliance” of oil companies and the Nigerian military. A foundational role was played by Ken Saro-Wiwa and the Ogoni people, a small ethnic group of 400,000, who established a political wing (MOSOP) to challenge Shell for environmental compensation and the Nigerian state for direct control of “their oil”. While Saro-Wiwa and the MOSOP leadership were hung by the Nigerian military in 1995, since that time the Niger delta has become a zone of conflict and heightened struggles as more minorities (the Adoni, the Itsekiri, the Ijaw) organize. Indeed, the central political issue in Nigeria currently is “resource control” which refers directly to who controls the oil resources and how ethnic minorities in the delta will “self-determine” their futures in a reformed federation.

The Niger delta is one of the most complex and fragile ecosystems in the world. It is also a source of vast wealth. These two characteristics have come into open conflict as increasingly enfranchised and militant oil-producing ethnic minorities are confronting the state and the oil companies in order to rehabilitate their environment and to regulate their resource base. At the same time this political mobilization around oil and the
environment has generated powerful forms of ethnic identification and conflict that threaten to convert the delta into an unstable and volatile zone of what has been called “organic nationalism”. The future of the environment of the Niger delta unfortunately rests in part on the enormous strategic significance and the vast wealth of a single commodity that happens to be the fuel of modernity, namely hydrocarbon capitalism.

Sources:
