

chapter ten

Struggles on the Nigerian Oil Rivers

(with Silvia Federici)

“Na you get oil? Foolish people.” (Does the oil belong to you? Foolish people.)
—Graffiti left behind after the Odi massacre by invading soldiers, Christmas
Day 1999

“Do people kill for oil? Chevron does in Opia and Ikiyan”
—Words on a banner in a demonstration in the Niger Delta

On March 20, 2003, three days after the US/UK invasion of Iraq, ChevronTexaco shut down its oil operations in Nigeria in response to a threat by local Ijaw militants to blow up eleven multinational oil installations (owned by ChevronTexaco, Royal/Dutch Shell and TotalFinaElf) they had occupied unless the government called off the military raids on their communities and responded to their demands for electoral reforms. ChevronTexaco also evacuated most of its staff from its main Escravos (meaning “slave” in Portuguese) oil export terminal. This decision will further decrease oil production that has been already cut by 350,000 barrels a day (about one sixth of total Nigerian oil production) because of the fighting between the Ijaw militants and soldiers that has been going on since 1998.

This decision will have much resonance within the world’s oil markets in the midst of a volatile period, not so much because of the lost oil production (which even in the most drastic scenario will reduce world production by less than one per cent), but because of the decisive place that the Niger Delta has both for the US government’s and oil companies’ plans for the future of the oil industry and for the international movement against capitalist globalization that has been so inspired by the “no blood for oil” movements there in the last decade. Certainly, if one measures the importance of a struggle by the amount of blood that has been shed in it, then the battle between

the people of the Niger Delta and the oil companies is very important. Since 1993 and the repression of MOSOP (Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People), the Niger and its tributaries have been soaked with blood as well as oil. In only one incident of the government's armed repression, the Odi massacre of Ijaw people, there were "2,000 deaths, many more missing, thousands forced to flee and virtually no house left standing in Odi" (Ibeanu 2002/2003: 30). Similar massacres took place against the Ogoni people between 1993 and 1998. All told, it is likely that the level of death and destruction in the Niger Delta in the last decade is comparable to the experience of Iraqis in the current invasion with thousands dead, tens of thousands injured and hundreds of thousands (perhaps millions) displaced.

What curse has been put on these people who live in what was a watery Garden of Eden filled with a thousand creeks, rivulets, and tributaries of the great Niger? The curse is that they were and are located in a central crossroads of the world market. Three centuries ago the Niger Delta (from Escarvos to Calabar) was the main storage and transshipment point of African slaves bound for the plantations of the Caribbean and the Americas. This trade poisoned the Delta people's social relations. Today they are caught in the middle of the global oil industry that is poisoning them physically, economically and socially as well.

They have been struggling against this fate with great courage and originality, especially since the early 1990s when the Ogoni people decided that the time was ripe to transform what had been a long fought, but unknown parochial struggle against both the Nigerian government and the global oil companies into an internationally recognized one. The Ogonis are a relatively small ethnic group in Nigeria (with a population of less than a million), but they have been in the middle of oil production in Nigeria from its beginning and they suffered greatly for it. They realized that if they had to fight a global oil company, in their case Shell, to get some reparations they too had to become global themselves. But how was a relatively small, impoverished ethnic group in the midst of an obscure part of Africa to "globalize itself" in order to take on a company like Royal/Dutch Shell?

Parochial ethnic politics had to be transcended to make clear that the Ogoni struggle was part of the worldwide ecological struggle against the major oil companies. On the heels of the "No Blood for Oil!" struggle against the first US-Iraq war the Ogonis pointed out that they too have suffered to fuel the profits of Shell and the industrial machines of Europe and the US. And with the help of one of their leaders, Kenule (Ken) Saro-Wiwa, who had built up an international audience with his

writings, the message made a connection with environmental groups around the planet. As Michael Fleshman put it:

[Saro-Wiwa] realized that an alliance between the Ogoni people, who were challenging [Shell] at the point of production, and Western environmental and human rights organizations campaigning at the profit point, greatly increased MOSOP's chances for success (Fleshman 2001: 6).

In an older terminology, MOSOP's strategy helped stimulate a recomposition of the anti-capitalist movement, since it made it clear that the Ogonis' demands for reparations for Shell's destruction of their environment were an integral part of the demands of the environmental movement's demands that the total costs of capitalist development be recognized and paid for by the corporations everywhere. In response to Saro-Wiwa's arrest and execution (actions Shell was complicit with), Greenpeace and many others organized an effective world-wide boycott of Shell that protested the blood for oil being painfully exchanged in Nigeria as it was in the Middle East. Ken Saro-Wiwa paid with his life for connecting the Ogoni with a world environmentalist movement, but it proved to be a model that has been used again and again by other small ethnic groups throughout the world since.

Not only is the anti-capitalist movement concerned with recent developments in the Niger Delta. It is also at the center of the US government's concern as well, especially since the change of leadership from the Clinton to the Bush Administration. At the time of the Saro-Wiwa execution, the US government, under Pres. Clinton, was still playing a neutral figure in Nigerian oil politics. Thus the Clinton Administration had a rather *laissez faire* attitude to Nigeria's membership in OPEC and was not insisting on applying neoliberal conditions on the production and sale of oil (e.g., there was no extraordinary effort to push for the privatization of the nationalized oil industry in Nigeria during the Clinton period). But the Bush Administration is opening a new page in world oil politics that will have enormous impact on Nigeria and the oil communities there. First, the Bush Administration sees Nigeria and West Africa in general as an increasingly important source of oil at a time when the Middle East will be very problematic for many years to come. In the major energy policy documents of the Bush Administration West Africa features prominently as a safe source of imported oil. For example, one of main recommendations VP Cheney's National Energy Policy Report makes to the President is "to deepen bilateral and multilateral engagements [with African governments] to promote a more receptive environment for US oil and gas trade, investment and operations" (quoted in (Turshen 2002/2003: 1)). The

Nigerian government is definitely responding to this interest. In 2001, 9% of US crude oil imports came from Nigeria, but the Nigerian government is committed to adding 1.5 million barrels a day in capacity in the near future which would allow it to dramatically increase its exports to the US (Knight 2002/2003: 8).

Second, the general approach of the Bush Administration in oil politics is to push for increasing privatization and neoliberalization of the oil industry. The war against Iraq can partially be seen as war to impose this regime on one of the pillars of nationalization of the oil industry in the 1970s. Nigeria will undoubtedly face an increasing “pressure” (or I should more accurately say, “terror,” in the face of the devastation wrought in Iraq) from its ever larger trading partner to comply with this agenda. Three corollaries of this agenda being: (1) Nigeria should leave OPEC; (2) the Nigerian government should reject even formal responsibility for the recovery of communities adjacent to the oil fields from the pollution produced by decades of irresponsible oil and gas production; (3) the Nigerian government should treat anti-oil company resistance in the Delta as part of the US “war on terrorism,” with all the consequences this involves, including the use of US troops to protect oil installations (as is happening in Colombia).

The change in US policy will undoubtedly have a deep impact on the struggle in the Niger Delta now that the Bush Administration sees it as a region vital to “national security” (instead of simply another good place for friendly oil companies to make money). Are the organizations demanding reparations from the oil companies in a position to deal with this change?

First we must recognize that the unit of organization in the Delta is ethnically based and rooted in agricultural land. But the Delta is thick with ethnicities and packets of land. Its infinite network of streams, mangrove forests, villages and farms tucked away on islands, has been the source of dozens of languages (and associated ethnicities) over the centuries. The achievement of the Ogonis in the early 1990s was to leap over this complexity and address the international ecological movement to get allies for its struggle. But this achievement was paid for at much cost and the results were not promising, at least not in the eyes of many Niger Delta militants. Consequently, other movements in the Delta have de-emphasized the internationalization of their struggle and have focused directly on negotiations with oil companies and the Nigerian government based upon their capacity to hinder or halt the production or shipment of oil.

Thus the most prominent movement in the Delta after the MOSOP effort was MOSIEN (Movement for the Survival of Ijaw Ethnic Nationality). Although the Ijaws borrowed the acronym style of the Ogonis, they did not take their international turn. The Ijaws form one of the largest ethnic groups in the Delta (with a population of approximately eight million) and they have organized themselves in the struggle to gain reparations from the oil companies by using the symbols and memories of their past. *Egbesu* is their god of war and the *Egbesu* cult has been the recruiting ground for young militants who have excarcerated their leaders from government prisons, taken over oil installations, and kidnapped oil workers.

This shift from MOSOP to the Ijaw resistance definitely indicates a change in tactics and activist philosophy among the militants in the Delta. MOSOP was formally a non-violent organization. Ken Saro-Wiwa and the other Ogoni leaders recognized that it was folly to believe that a small ethnic group could directly confront the might of the Nigerian army (which was controlled by a military government when he was alive). This is not the case with Ijaw armed resistance, even though it has faced devastating attacks by the Nigerian military, including the horrendous Odi Christmas massacre in 1999. This shift in tactics put into question much of the international support that the Ogoni struggle and Saro-Wiwa's martyrdom had engendered for struggles in the Delta. As Fleshman pointed out:

...the advent of armed resistance to corporate and government exploitation and the highly publicized kidnappings of oil workers has raised a host of philosophical and ideological difficulties for the international solidarity movement. The kidnappings provided the oil companies and Western governments with ammunition to justify their call for a military solution to the resistance (Fleshman 2001: 11)

This does not mean that there were no other important changes in the struggle beside the turn to armed confrontation with the government and oil companies. One of the most dramatic developments was the entrance of women's organizations into the struggle. Women in Nigeria International noted that in August 10, 2002:

The women... from Itsekiri, Ijaw, Ilaje and Urhobos, at a news conference in Warri asked [Shell] to pay N150m [approximately \$100,000] to the victims of security brutalisation on August 8, 2002 'within the next 10 days to avoid chaos and crisis of unprecedented dimension in the region.' They also called for a tripartite meeting between the multi-national oil companies, government representatives and Niger Delta women leaders as well as the

establishment of a permanent body comprising all the multi-national oil companies, the government and rural Niger Delta women where all the grievances would be addressed in the future.

As a threat, the women remembered the old tactic of shaming soldiers by appearing before them collectively naked (which was an effective tactic in the Aba Women's War of 1929 against the British). Consequently, they threatened that "within 10 days from today, if our hospital and rehabilitation bills are not paid, we will all come out enmasse fully naked, and we shall occupy not only their gates but their flow stations throughout the Niger Delta so that they can come and rape their mothers again just as they did on the 8th of August."

What was more threatening to the oil companies and Nigerian government than the presence of thousands of naked women occupying their oil installations, however, was simply the fact that women from different, often conflicting ethnic groups had gotten together at all. For the most powerful weapon the government and the oil companies have in escaping paying reparations is the division between the groups themselves. For however powerful ethnic ties are in strengthening the will to resist, they are also extremely divisive. As Okechukwu Ibeanu describes the Delta, these divisions are also many and treacherous:

One recalls the Ijaw-Ilaje conflict, the Ogoni-Andoni conflict, the Ogoni-Okrika conflict, the internecine conflict between the two Ijaw clans of Basambri and Ogbologbomaribri in Nembe, and the fatal wars between Ijaw, Urhobo and Itsekiri over the ownership of Warri, a major center of petrobusiness in Nigeria. The central *causis belli* in these conflicts are claims made communities to land and creeks on which there are petroleum deposits or oil installations. In many cases, state officials and oil companies either generate or fuel these conflicts in their antics of divide and rule. For instance, it is known that oil companies have local chiefs and notables on their payrolls in return for cultivating favorable public opinion on behalf of oil companies. However, the oil companies increasingly divulge their names to restive youths, thus fueling anger and conflicts within communities (Ibeanu 2001: 13).

These conflicts have resulted in thousands of deaths as well in the last decade. Consequently, the fact that women from the oft-warring Itsekiri, Ijaw, Ilaje and Urhobos groups could get together in a united front against the Nigerian government and the oil companies indicates that at least they have understood the secret of power in the

Niger. Whether their unity will set the pace for the reparations movement in the Delta is an open question.

The demands of the Ijaw group that forced ChevronTexaco to stop oil production in late March 2003 indicate that this unity is still not on the table. For along with the demand for pulling out government troops from Ijaw villages and towns, the president of the Federated Niger Delta Ijaw Communities organization, Bello Oboko, demanded that voting boundaries be redrawn in the run up to local elections in late April!

It is clear, however, that with the increasing importance of the Niger Delta oil to the US government's plans, these struggles for reparations will be forced to take on a new dimension pioneered by the women of the Delta.

April 2003

Bibliography

Fleshman, Michael 2001. The International Community and the Crisis in Nigeria's Oil Producing Communities: A Perspective on the US Role. *Association of Concerned Africa Scholars Bulletin*, No. 60/61 (Fall), pp. 3-11.

Ibeanu, Okechukwu 2001. Janus Unbound: Antinomies of Petrobusiness and Petropolitics in the Niger Delta. *Association of Concerned Africa Scholars Bulletin*, No. 60/61, pp. 12-15.

Ibeanu, Okechukwu 2002/2003. (Sp)oil of Politics: Petroleum, Politics, and the Illusion of Development in the Niger Delta, Nigeria. *Association of Concerned Africa Scholars Bulletin*, No. 64 (Winter), pp. 16-36.

Turshen, Meredith 2002/2003. Introduction to the African Development Debates.. *Association of Concerned Africa Scholars Bulletin*, No. 64 (Winter), pp. 1-3.