ELECHI AMADI'S GREAT PONDS AND PETROLEUM EXPLOITATION IN NIGERIA: THE CHALLENGE OF RESOURCE CONTROL

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Abstract
The issue of resource pervades Elechi Amadi's Great Ponds and is a big challenge to the Niger Delta People who over the years since petroleum exploitation in the 1950s have struggled for its control. Much revenue is generated from petroleum and most recently gas exploitation just as the Great Ponds, Wagaba Pond in particular is rich with fish that sustains Chiolu village but is poached by others, the Aliakoro in particular. This paper examined the issue of resource control in the two settings and context, and noted that wars or violence is a futile strategy to gaining control but that dialogue, peace and proactive strategies are better.

Introduction
Every epoch in human history has witnessed some form of struggle for the control of one or a number of natural resources among many human groups or societies. The challenge of resources control and strategies adopted to effect control have varied over time, depending on the ideas of those involved in the controversy and the exigencies of the time. In the pre-colonial period, land, fishing rights over rivers, lands, creeks, control of markets for raw materials, mining rights over salt lakes, and so on provided challenges as to who should control both territories and quantities. In the colonial and post-colonial periods, similar challenges over the control of economic resources such as land, solid minerals, markets, raw materials and so on have been witnessed. Crises and conflicts are often generated in the process particularly as one group tries to dominate the other. Oftentimes, lives are lost, many are impoverished and properties damaged.

Western imperialism and capitalism, hi-tech and globalization as well as the power of the G8 countries (the industrialized nations of Britain, United State of America, France, Germany, Russia, Italy, Japan and Canada over access to WTO markets and economic resources capture the picture of resource control. However, this paper examines resource control in two contexts that of the Great ponds of the pre-colonial Ikwerre people of Rivers Sate as discussed by Elechi Amadi and the exploitation of petroleum in post-colonial Niger Delta region for which resource control demand by the Niger Delta peoples had been vehement. The various strategies adopted, the consequences and implications for the control of resources are also explored.

The Great Ponds and Petroleum Resources in Nigeria
Deep inside the great primeval forests of the Ikwerre people we the Great Ponds, very rich in fish. Many villages shared these ponds which were flooded during the rains but Chiolu village had remarkably rich ponds that their neighbours coveted, poached and ravaged when they could. The rich natural resources of these ponds, fish, and particularly that of the very productive pond known as the Pond of Wagaba typically reflects the abundance of petroleum (crude or rock oil) largely found among rocks or in the ground or in off-shore wells inside seas and gas in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria that has sustained the nation’s economy since the 1970s. In fact the petroleum sector accounts for more than 80 percent of government revenues, 90 percent of foreign exchange earnings, 95 percent of export receipts and 40 percent of Gross Domestic Product (GNP) (SPDC 2004:7). This is not surprising because as a complex mixture of hydrogen and carbon (hydrocarbon) it produces many fractions such as petrol, aviation fuel, kerosene, wax, diesel fuel, lubricating oil, bitumen and so on for secondary industries and services after refining.

The significance of these ponds to the pre-colonial Ikwerre people, the Chiolu in particular, necessitated their protection. Thus, it is not surprising the Eze Diali, the elders and young men of Chiolu decided to stop the people of Aliakoro from uncontrolled poaching of their ponds by sending some warriors and other young men to lay ambush for Aliakoro poachers and capture them alive. As Eze Diali emphasized, the poaching was getting out of hand and the men of Aliakoro were actually beginning to claim some of Chiolu's ponds and this was a worrisome situation. Capturing one or more of the poachers alive and asking for heavy ransoms he thought would serve as a deterrent to poachers and establish the...
allegation of poaching by the men of Aliakoro Olumba one of Elechi Amadi’s major characters who led the Chiolu ambush partly showed and maintained dogged determination on their quest for the resource control of Wagaba Pond.

Regional governments in Nigeria had full retention of mining rents and royalties from 1957 before military rule. At this time they paid only 30 percent as tax into the federal government’s distributable pool account (DPA) but which later increased to 35 percent in 1964. From 1966 when military rule commenced and the 1963 constitution was suspended, the federal government introduced new tax measures and transferred the legislation and administration mining rent and royalties to the federal government. This made the right to revenue from company income tax, J port, export, petroleum profit tax (PPT), excise taxes and mining royalties and rent to be vested in the center (Sanni, 2003: 15-16). The Aboyade Technical Committee on Revenue of 1977 recommended that all federally collected revenues, without distinction should be paid into the federation account and to be shared among the federal government, states and for the first times local government councils in this order, 60, 30 and 10 percent respectively. It also created a special grant account (3 percent from the federal government share) to be administered by the federal military government for the benefit of mineral producing areas and areas in need of rehabilitation from emergencies and disasters. Since the nullification of the 1980 Okogbo's commission recommendation the order of sharing the federation account severely changed but the amount for mineral revenue increased to 13 percent in 1999. The land use decree of 1978 which vested land ownership (right to land) on the state governments and the 1999 constitution which assigned federal government the responsibility of mineral exploration and exploitation consolidated the control of mineral resources in the centre. As Sanni (2003:19) rightly observed, the lopsidedness in the fiscal assignments resulted in intense agitation for fiscal decentralization and resource control that subsequently led to the controversy on on-shore/off-shore dichotomy. With the federal government hold on the nation’s mineral resources, she is certainly set against the indigenes of the oil (petroleum) producing communities who feel marginalized and deprived from the proceeds of petroleum exploitation.

For the Chiolu people, they can tap their natural resource of Wagaba pond with their local technology-canoes, rafts, fish raps, matchets and so on. But the Niger Delta people cannot because modern sophisticated technology that is capital intensive and expertise in petroleum engineering and technology are needed for exploiting the rich resources of petroleum and gas that are virtually ubiquitous in the region. Moreover, the federal government is in firm control of the resources, by virtue of legislations. In contrast the Chiolu people know that they own Wagaba pond and should be in full control of it. This claim is very explicit in the poacher's conversation as they approached the pond. The poachers from Aliakoro went in two rafts, Overwhelmed by the quality of the pond and the quantity of fish in it, the following remarks were made. "The pond of Wagaba can never be impoverished', 'I have never seen a pond so full of fish'. 'A pity it doesn't belong to Aliakoro', 'It may one day'. This desire raises the question of how Aliakoro people can claim the pond. Further, from their conversation, it was evident that Eze Okeri, the chief of Aliakoro intended to lay claims of ownership because his grandfather had told him that the pond rightly belonged to them and that Chiolu's claim to it to was dubious. Indeed the pond was worth fighting for and did entail a lot of fighting for establishment of ownership. Having eavesdropped their conversation, Olumba and his followers attacked the poachers, taking two as captives.

Is it possible to poach petroleum as the Aliakoro poached Wagaba pond for fish? Certainly, yes and whatever the nomenclature used 'Poaching is universal as one of the captive, Chileru stated. To him, poaching is mere removal of a few of the fish from the pond that is richly filled with fish. Arguing against the captive's claim that they only poached, their guard in Eze Diali's reception hall where they were kept until they were ransomed explained that regular/habitual poaching is stealing. Illegal petroleum bunkering is similar to poaching and is one of the challenges of resources control. Bunkering is sustained because of the diverse interests of the bunkerers, youths and security personnel. Agbo (2005: 27-29) noted that poverty, corruption, non-enforcement of laws against bunkerers, youth unemployment are some of the factors that have sustained bunkering. Again, the challenge of who is to control the oil fields where bunkering takes place has caused conflicts between militant groups in the Niger Delta. There are several manifolds at different oil fields, which are similar to the Great Ponds. Here, many barges illegally load petroleum (poaching and stealing) with the security personnel, oil company workers, youths and militants as accomplices. This contrasts Olumba led party's role in preventing poaching at Wagaba pond. Another poaching device is that of "topping" whereby tankers that come for illegal lifting of petroleum take more than what they pay for. For example, a ship that is billed to lift 200,000 metric tons of crude oil comes to Nigeria with a 500,000-tonnage carrier and is assisted to lift the latter quantity
by personnel of Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC), pipelines and Products marketing Company (PPMC), and Department of Petroleum Resources (DPR), (Agbo, 200:31). Given the level of connivance by those who are expected to secure petroleum resource, the Niger Delta youths claim: “It is our oil and others have been taking it, as we can’t beat them, we've joined them”.

This statement shows awareness of the right to their natural resource irrespective of the nation's appropriation through laws and a stake to resource control.

The Navy and other security personnel according to Agbo do not have the equipment and boats (unlike Olumba and his group who have charms, matchets etc to deal with poachers) to match the bunkerers devices particularly those at Bonny who have sophisticated electronic devices that track the positions of the Navy and evade them.

The Great Ponds for generations were the cause of wars and heavy loss of lives between Chiolu and Aliakoro. A period of thirty years interval after the last war and before the capture of Chieru and Ejimole that night by Olumba's group was claimed by the Chiolu as a proof to their ownership of Wagaba pond just as the Land Use Act CAP 202, Lands (Title Vesting etc), Oil in Navigable Waters Act, CAP 337, Oil Terminal Dues Act, CAP 339, Petroleum Control Act. CAP 351, petroleum Production and Distribution (Anti-Sabotage) Act CAP 353, Petroleum Profits Tax Act, CAP 354, Oil Pipeline Act, CAP 338, Territorial Waters Act, CAP 428, Associated Gas Re-injection Act, CAP 26, National Inland Waters Authority Act, Revenue Mobilization, Allocation and Fiscal Commission Act, CAP 392 and the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, etc invest ownership of petroleum and gas in the Federal Government. However, in the history of Wagaba pond the peoples are deprived of their right to control their resources and pay a percentage to the government, as is the practice in some other democratic countries. The myriad of adversities caused by human and natural disasters such as gas flaring, oil spillage, coastal erosion, flooding, poor refuse management, youth militancy, poverty, inadequate network of roads, lack of potable water, electricity, good quality health and educational institutions, and so on, aggravate the situation. When militant groups clash, for supremacy or other reasons daily activities are disrupted. As they strike unannounced there is usually general uncertainty. Other problems that have been escalated by petroleum exploration and exploitation such as prostitution, adolescent pregnancy, wide-spread of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), HIV/AIDS, non adherence to the terms of the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) reached
with host communities by oil companies also contribute to tension and insecurity in the region. Niger Delta women are not left out in this struggle for resource control. Unlike the women of Aliakoro and Chiolu who did not directly participate in the wars, Ekpeye women in Rivers State on Wednesday, January 23, 2006 took part in the invasion of SPDC’s Ubie flow station, Idu Ekpeye in Ahouda West Local Government Area. They went to the location with their cooking utensils, mats, kitchen chairs and other items necessary for their daily subsistence. Women, including nursing mothers and babies slept at the flow-station while the men and youths retired to their houses at night (Nimengoka, 2006:1). Similarly, women from Warri in Delta State lay siege on Chevron in 2004. The Movement for the Survival of Ogoni people (MOSOP) has always had Ogoni women directly involved in their struggle for resource control. During the struggle for resource control by the Niger Delta peoples at the National level and the controversy over the On-shore/Off-shore Dichotomy Abrogation Bill in particular, women always traveled to Abuja for the court sessions and even sent a delegation to impress on the Head of State to sign the oil bill as amended by the national legislature. On this issue, the Presidency and the National Assembly differed on the distance between the Nigerian coast and the seaward boundaries for which the Babangida regime initiated the 13 percent derivation revenue (in 1995) is to apply. Eventually, 200 nautical miles set by the National Assembly was assented to rather than the 24 nautical miles suggested by the President. However, this issue which started in 2002 was only resolved in 2005 leaving on its trail untold hardship, loss of lives and properties. In context, Elechi Amadi’s women of Aliakoro and Chiolu probably yielded to their cultural expectations and gender role which did not permit women to be directly involved in wars as warriors. In modern times that bridge is subtly being broken and so women are more active participants than before.

Arriving at a decision to establish absolute ownership of Wagaba pond was therefore left to the gods because both parties made vehement declarations that any decision not favouring them would result in continuous war. The leaders and other delegates from the eight villages of Erekwi clan administered the oath on Chilu’s representative; Olumba whom the Aliakoro people insisted should take the oath. The idea was to eliminate him so that Chiolu would not longer have a courageous warrior who is committed to safeguard and demand and effect resource control. At the dark shrines of Ogbunabali the god of the night, Olumba in a solemn voice repeated after the priest: ‘I swear by Ogbunabali the god of the night that the Pond of Wagaba belongs to Chiolu. ‘If this is not true let me die within six months; ‘If true, let me live and prosper’.

In order to ensure that the people of Aliakoro did not harm Olumba by physical or spiritual means (because if Oluba died within six months, the pond was Aliakoro’s but if he survived it was Chiolu’s the priest poured out libations against such persons and their attempts in the following speech as documented by Elechi Amadi (1969:86) "Those who would harm Olumba by the knife or the barbed arrow, by strange charms or witchcraft, kill them Ogbunabali King of the Night, kill them and show signs. With this truce normal lifestyle commenced and women could go to the farms unescorted.

Having staked his life to ensure total victory over the control of Wagaba pond by Chiolu people, it was also the community’s responsibility to ensure the safety of Olumba who according to Eze Diah had become a public property. A code of conduct was drawn up for him by the Eze, elders and top warriors as follows: he was not to travel out of Chiolu, climb trees, go to farm alone and should eat only food cooked by his first wife. Uncomfortable as these rules were for a very active person like Olumba, a clear sense of social insurance, solidarity, determination towards the attainment of a goal and unity was demonstrated. This situation raises the question of how appreciative are the Niger Delta people over the loss of lives of prominent people such as late Isaac Adaka Boro, Captain Amangala, Nyananyo, Ken Saro Wiwa and so on who died fighting the cause of resource control? How even those who are alive are appreciated? Can this quest engender unity in the Niger Delta against a common enemy, the federal government that has appropriated the right over the control of Niger Delta People Petroleum? A major challenge here is the need for synergy among all the groups clamouring for resource control and an articulate way of presenting issues as well as mapping out strategies to actualize resource control.

Olumba, in spite of all the problems and ill health he suffered did not die and his hitherto kidnapped wife returned. Wago, his major opponent died. Chiolu established control of the Wagaba Pond but could not control the spread and adverse effect of the 1918 influenza that nearly exterminated people in Chiolu, Aliakoro, other villages of Erekwi clan and the Rikwos (the riverine neighbours).

The Niger Delta oil bearing communities in particular, know irrespective of the interpretation of whatever laws that tend to deprive them of their resource control that the land and whatever is found therein belong to them right from the time their ancestors occupied and settled there. MEND started its
fight for the Niger Delta region to have a greater control of its oil resources and the Niger Delta Civil Society coalition (NDCSC) insists that the restoration of the people's right to control their resources is the only avenue to lasting peace in the region. These information by Agbajule (2006:7), Pere (2006:2), and Ebiri (2006:7) respectively bear eloquent testimony of the people. But as the god (spiritual) Ogbunabali, the physical god, President Olusegun Obasanjo as the chairman of a 50-member new Council of Social and Economic Development of the Niger Delta (a stakeholders council/forum) is by this action poised to undertake a more meaningful approach to solving the problems of the region. According to Onuorah (2006:4), the President sees the challenge as a national one that requires multifarious but co-ordinated solutions. Consequently, everyone concerned with solving the problems must respect one another. With this charge for truce he concluded that embarking on violence is futile since it does not solve any problem satisfactorily. This indeed is an appeal to the conscience of the Niger Delta peoples and present and future law makers. Can this truce be sustained? Beyond policy formulation and mapping out of strategies to confront the problems is the issue of quality implementation of decisions taken and the need to punish those who ere.

A major challenge of the Niger Delta people is the Human Immune Deficiency Virus (HIV) and Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS). As influenza decimated the people of Erekwi clan and beyond so is HIV/AIDS in the region and beyond. Having no cure yet, how does the region guarantee the survival of those who would- ensure resource control or those who would control the resources when eventually the battle is won? Yet one more challenge rests with the people to judiciously utilize whatever amount of revenue they generate for the welfare of the people.

Recommendations
Conflict engendering violence is usually given leverage whenever the issue of controlling human and natural resources arises. This has been established in this discourse which subtly compares the issue in both traditional and modem times. In order to avoid conflicts of this nature the following are recommended:

a) Enlightenment of the citizenry on their rights and responsibilities to the various resources in their communities;
b) Proper management and equity in the sharing of these resources for the benefit of the citizens;
c) Good leadership that ensures transparency, accountability, feedback in the co-ordination and use of the resources for the benefit of all;
d) Respect for rules and regulations guiding the use of community resources;
e) Mutual trust between leaders and followers within a community as well as their neighbours;
f) Adoption of dialogue and other proactive communication strategies for maintaining cordial relationship

Conclusion
Events in the lives of human beings and in societies tend to be similar as exemplified by Elechi Amadi’s Great Ponds and the quest for resource control by the Niger Delta peoples. In fact little did Elechi Amadi know that his creation in the book. Great Ponds would have a lot of relevance to the issue of resource control in the Niger Delta given the disparity in time frame and sequence of events. This credit makes literary works living history and a repository for reconstructing the past as well as for guiding future human activities.

The Great Ponds rich in fishes, usually conserved during the rainy season and the huge deposit of petroleum and gas in the Niger Delta depict a naturally endowed region with natural resources. Usually, there is a need for producing and sharing of such resources which implies active participation in decision making, the implementation and control. All these are sought for by Elechi Amadi major villages and the Niger Delta people. Struggles for resource control can be violent with loss of lives and properties but dialogue and peaceful conduct are better viable options. While an invisible god provides the ultimate answer to the controversy over absolute ownership of Wagaba Pond and this is not surprising, given the role of gods in human affairs in that dispensation. In modern times the courts, traditional rulers, the head of state, a priest of modem religious bodies, and so on but a person that is physically seen arbitrates. Certainly, there are tactics that can be employed in a peaceful atmosphere to attain control whether partial or absolute over any claims whatsoever that any human group makes. Therefore control over petroleum and/or gas in the Niger Delta or indeed greater control can be gradually achieved in a peaceful atmosphere without loss of lives and properties.
References


