IMPERATIVES OF SOCIO-RELIGIOUS MEASURES IN SOLVING THE NIGER DELTA CRISIS IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

Against the background of militarism not being a strange phenomenon in the Nigerian society, its attendant negative impacts remain imminent. The area for this study was the Niger Delta located within the southern geo-political zone of Nigeria, comprising nine states of Abia, Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo, Imo, Ondo and Rivers. The study sought to expose the mistakes inherent in the search for peace in the Niger Delta, while excluding the indispensable role of the religious institution as a major player in the search. The survey of literature relevant to the subject - matter reveals that religion plays a vital role in unity and cooperation and can influence upon an individual than the society. It was the conclusion of the study that religions, which like any other phenomenon with good and bad sides, would offer itself the best tool for social engineering to quell the lingering crisis in the Niger Delta region. For this to be achieved, it (religion) must be prioritized and funded. Church and other religious organizations should be partners in progress to achieve social developmentin the region.

Keywords: Niger Delta crisis, millitarism, oil and gas

INTRODUCTION

Militarism is not a new manifestation in the history of the Nigerian nation. It first emerged as an instrument in the hands of indigenes to check the excesses of the colonial masters before the Independence to bring under control the abuses and excesses of the colonial masters in respect of political oppression and exploitation. In post-colonial Nigeria, the structure was retained and institutionalized as part of the colonial heritage. In the Niger Delta, the area under study, the emergence of militancy (used here interchangeably with militarism) was further stimulated, strengthened and given embodiment by the oil and gas exploration and exploitation in the area which led to the perceived and actual marginalization of the people of the area.

Over the past decades, and particularly in recent times, different militant groups of varying intensity and strengths, as well as newly formed associations and professional belligerent bodies have emerged in an attempt to address a similar problem - the problem of exploitation, oppression, denial of right of ownership, deprivation of human right and marginalization of the Niger Delta as a region. Such militant groups include Movement for the survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP), the Ijaw Youth Council (IYC), The Niger Delta Vigilante Group (NDVG), Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), Egbesu Boys of Africa (EBA), Ijaw National Congress (INC), Ijaw Peace Movement (IPM), Niger Delta People's Volunteer Front (NDPVF), among others. The activities of these groups, either singly or in combination with like minds, gave rise to crises after crises in the Niger Delta region for most of the past decades. It has also been claimed that the nature and political environment of the Nigerian state, the failure of political leadership and public institutions, the structure of power and economic relations amongst groups, the interplay of militarism, and the ever present monster called corruption, were some of the factors that have

provided the background for the emergence of ethnic militia groups in Nigeria (Adams, 2003).

During the military era, the response of the government in power to the Niger Delta crisis was to militarize the community by dispatching an "army of occupation" to the oil producing communities. This wrong strategy was aimed at taming the restive youths, individuals and associations, thereby ensuring the free flow of oil revenue to the Nigerian State. The mode of response by the indigenes of the area invariably led to the arrest and detention without trial, and in some cases, the execution, of some of the key elements of the area (Akinyele, 2001). The extra-judicial punishment by hanging of Ken Saro Wiwa and eight other Ogoni youths in 1996 is still very fresh in the memory of concerned Nigerians and others beyond.

Therefore, this present research seeks to expose the mistakes inherent in the search for peace in the Niger Delta, while excluding the indispensable role of the religious institution as a major player in the search. (Here religious institution embraces all religious organizations that are formally organized into churches and attracting sizeable numbers in membership for the purpose of religious worship). It also seeks to identify some instances in history where religion as a social institution has successfully been used in the solution of social problems and in the management of social crises, thereby contributing to social development.

It is believed that this study will be found to be useful to many sectors of the Nigerian political economy in the search for the much-desired peace, which has long deluded the Niger Delta and retarded the process of development in the area. It will also help the various committees involved in the search for peace in the Niger Delta to involve the religious organizations in the area in the search exercise. Additionally, the findings of this study will be of immense help to government in her future policy enactment. Members of the public will also be conscientized to the role that

the religious organizations can play, as history testifies, in the solution of societal problems. The religious bodies themselves when taken into confidence will be more alert to their responsibility in contributing meaningfully to the development of their areas of operation. This will create a general awareness that the Church is no longer the structure whose main concern is the salvation of the soul as was the conception in times past.

THE STUDY AREA

The Niger Delta is located within the Southern geo-political zone of Nigeria. It comprises of nine States, namely Abia, Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross Rivers, Delta, Edo, Imo, Ondo and Rivers State. The population is estimated at 30 million people and covers some 70,000 square kilometers. It shares common terrestrial boundaries with Enugu, Ebonyi, Anambra, Kogi and Ekiti states in the North, Cameroon in the East, Ondo and Ogun in the West and the Atlantic Coast in the South.

Economically, the Niger Delta is richly endowed with natural resources. It can best be described as the food basket of the nation because of the huge deposits of crude oil and other forms of mineral resources. Between 1908 and 2006, the region generated about 90% of the nation's foreign exchange earnings. Outside of crude oil, its contribution in the areas of agriculture and manufacturing is enormous . The region's ability to generate such economic potentials in great quantity for the nation for both internal and external consumption also makes the Niger Delta region to yield with ease to the menace of creek pollution, destruction of aquatic life, oil spillage, acid rain, erosion menace and degradation and soil infertility generally.

These are but a few of the disasters befalling the people of the Niger Delta which have led to the incessant instances of militant outrages in various forms including vandalizing of property, disruption of oil companies operations, kidnapping incidents and

hostage takings of oil company operators by the Niger Delta youth. In the words of Suberu (1996), "Conflict has become more tense and controversial between the government and the oil producing communities of the Niger Delta region as the years go by."

Suberu has further noted that the Niger Delta region has negatively assumed a centre stage in Nigerian politics. Such development, if not checked, has a great potential of making nonsense of the Nigerian democratic process and balkanizing the country and its huge resource deposits. The major argument advanced by the Niger Delta people is that they have not fully benefited from the petroleum and other resources that are extracted from their area despite their huge contribution to the Nigerian economy in both human and material resources.

Other problems, aside from oil politics, that confront the people of the Niger Delta include growing population, ethnic rivalries and strives along with their own share of the general political instability. These and many others have cumulatively resulted in structural and infrastructural decay, making the area grossly underdeveloped. The result is felt in the region in the unprecedented experience of insecurity in its diverse forms - crises of militancy, kidnapping, armed robbery, hostage taking and youth restiveness, and so on.

RELIGION AS AN EFFECTIVE SOCIAL INSTRUMENT

Much like any other social institution, religion (used here as the formal gathering of believers in an effort to express their belief in, and relationship with, the unseen Deity) has been seen to perform some social functions within the human society. Although predominantly otherworldly in intent and orientation, religion has been known to function as bifurcally in the society. To dismiss an institution as the Marxists have attempted to do on the basis of certain negative latent manifestations would amount to eliminating all social institutions for much the same reason. Study after study

has shown that there is no human institution, from politics to the family that cannot be associated with one or two negative influences as by-products. It was under a similar consideration that Robert K. Merton (1968) suggested the application of the net balance of consequences of all social items in order to give an item its proper position in the social order.

Accordingly, religion must be given its right of place in the handling of societal problems. Nigeria is made up of different religions namely: Christianity, Islam and the African Traditional Religion. Though these religions are social institutions aimed at a common goal of sustaining peaceful co-existence of humanity in their social environment, have some dicrepancies.

While the Christians are monotheistic from the world view and believe in the existence of God as the creator of heaven and earth and all that is in it and Jesus Christ a the son of God and Messiah of the world, Islam do not see Jesus Christ as the son of God and the Messiah of mankind but as a great prophet just like any other prophet sent by God. They believe that Mohammed is a prophet of God and so is Jesus Christ. As for African Traditional Religion, (ATR) which expresses the religious beliefs, customs, norms, behaviour, ethics and pattern of administration of people in their various communities and societies is polytheistic.

In an attempt to give credence to the prominent role of the religious institution, Hamilton (1995) clearly stated: Ironically, it often seems to be the case that religious beliefs can have a much greater influence upon and hold over the individual than society does, since it is often out of religious convictions that individuals will fly in the face of society or attempt to withdraw from it, as in the case of many sectarian movements.

The use of religion in the solution to human predicament is not irrational because religion addresses the inner man's conscience and restricts vehement outpouring of emotions in the form of anger, and in the case of the Niger Delta region, condemning religious

riots in all ramifications by fundamentalists. Additionally, religion adds the divine and spiritual dimension to social norms and regulations, giving weight to the purely human condition since all religions preach brotherhood.

This it does by teaching forgiveness of evil doers, encouraging peaceful search for one's right and discouraging war as an instrument for peace. After the crusades of the Middle Ages, no religion today encourages its adherents to search membership through the sword.The institution of religion must be recognized as a core institution, which has come to stay because of its prominent roles in interaction, social control and the agent of peace. In the mind of Emile Durkheim (1961), one of the great authorities in the society-religion dynamics, "…social life is impossible without the shared values and moral beliefs that form the collective conscience, without which there would be no social order, social control, social solidarity or cooperation" (in Haralambos 2000, 407). It was Durkheim's further contention that the attitude of respect towards the sacred, which the faithful expresses, is the same as applied towards social duties and obligations. It is in this understanding that the individuals acknowledge the importance of the society and their dependence on it. In line with this consideration, Emile Durkheim was to argue, ignoring possible side effects of the same institution, that religion strengthens the unity of the group by promoting social solidarity.

Another insightful contribution came from the British anthropologist of religion, Branislaw Malinowski. Using data drawn from a small-scale non-literate society of the Trobiand Islanders in New Guinea, Malinowski developed his thesis on the social usefulness of religion. Unlike Durkheim who sees religion as reflecting society as a whole, Malinowski sees religion as reinforcing social norms and values and promoting social solidarity.

Most importantly, Malinowski stresses the indispensable role of religion in situations of emotional stress, much like the one in

the Niger Delta, that threaten social solidarity and other crises-prone situations. Such crises include anxiety, tension and others that tend to disrupt social solidarity and cohesion (Malinowski, 1954). The above assessments are very descriptive of the need for religious intervention in relation to the current situation in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. For Malinowski, the distinctive contribution of religion to society is its ability to promote social solidarity by dealing with situations of emotional stress, such as those being experienced by the people of the Niger Delta. Such situations go a long way in threatening the stability of the entire social fabric.

A more contemporary debate on the relevance of religion in the society is from the American sociologist, Talcott Parsons. Considering religion as a cultural system, Parsons sees religious beliefs as providing guidelines for human action and standards against which people's conduct can be evaluated. For him, religion is addressed to particular problems that occur in life. Since life is far from following any smooth pattern, religion comes in handy enough to address the problems that disrupt it, and attempting to create uncertainty (Parsons, 1965a). The above claims are possible because religion addresses the inner man and his conscience and restricts vehement outpouring of emotions in the form of uncontrolled anger. Additionally, religion adds the sacred dimension to social norms and regulations, giving them necessary weight. Is it not proper then that religion should be appealed to at this period of emotional turbulence in the Niger Delta?

There are further instances of the functionality of religion in moments of crises globally. For example, after World War 11, unprecedented social changes were witnessed in Western Europe in lifestyle, politics, economics, education, science and technology, communication and even in religion. The British Ashbridge Conference of 1958 defined social development as "nothing than the whole process of change and advancement in a territory,

considered in terms of the progressive well-being of society and of the individual". Immediately, the Church extended the above idea and spoke of the 'principle of subsidiarity' the idea of devolving roles to intermediate agencies that are closest to the target groups and giving them more sense of identity. Global organizations like the World Summit for Social Development (WSSD) held in Copenhagen in March 1995 committed itself to an 'action plan', which embodied "political, economic, ethical, and spiritual vision of social development" (WSSD, 1995).

While the political and economic were familiar terrain, the inclusion of the 'spiritual' and 'ethical' in the spheres of intervention were new and revolutionary. It underscored a change in attitude and language and the importance of approaching development issues in a more integral manner, a model that has remained constant in the Social Doctrine of the Church (SDC). Therefore, in the use of the Social Development framework for human promotion, the religious and secular, that is, Church and State, actually meet. This perspective of shared concern between Church and State was adopted in Sweden as the country's earliest social services were provided by the joint effort of the Lutheran Church and Government.

In contemporary scene, both State and Church actually share the same vision of social development, but unfortunately, they follow separate directions. What is in fact needed is a strategic partnership of unified vision. As clearly emphasized by a senior World Bank official, "we live in dangerous times, with dangerous roads ahead, and such roads are best traveled together with those whose direction and paths are essentially the same" (Marshall, 2005). On the same note, The Fathers of the Vatican Council state that " the Church sensing that she is truly and intimately linked with mankind and its history, claims the freedom to express her moral judgment on this reality, whenever it may be required to define the fundamental rights of the person or the salvation of souls" (GS, 1). In all the above, the

need to call on the religious institution in the effort to address current social problems, like the type presently experienced by the people of the Niger Delta is hardly in doubt. Regrettably, aside from sporadic instances of what has come to be called solemn assemblies, the role of religion as an indispensable social institution has not been fully tapped in the long time search for solution to the lingering crisis in the Niger Delta region.

It must be clearly stated that the Niger Delta crisis is not only a crisis of material resource development - neglect of infrastructure, lack of basic amenities and absence of institutional framework and collective marginalization etc. It is a lot more. It is paramountly a crisis of human (capital) development - a development of the human person, mind and personality and his ability to co-exist and meaningfully relate with fellowmen in times of social breakdown and national upheaval.

CONCLUSION

Human life is not all about survival - eating, drinking and making merry. Most importantly, it is about living, that is, having the ability to coexist with others (the role of what could rightly be called clinical religion) even in the phase of problems, difficulties and unexpected life crisis such as are being faced presently by the people of the Niger Delta. It is about coping with life strategies in its differential manifestations. There is little doubt that there have been instances during which religion has exposed its darkside by featuring negatively in social life.

This is unfortunate, but understandable, since the human element is always at play in all instances of human activity. One can recall with ease the havocs perpetuated in the middle Ages with religion as the frontline instrument, in the name of holy war, or, does one forget in a haste the sad events associated with the Spanish

inquisition? What of the Protestant-Catholic face-off presently in Northern Ireland? Coming closer home, how many tussles have we undergone recently, in the name of religion?

In the face of all these, or probably more, it would still be unfair to look at religion as encouraging a divisive tendency since these manifestations are not in the character of religion as religion. By the way, one wonders if religion is the only social institution that combines positive and negative manifestations. The answer is obviously, No. To ignore religion as a result of some instances of social disorganization associated with it is "throwing up the baby with the bath water".

Looking at some practical areas where religion has been used effectively in times of national crises, it can be recalled that during the farm crisis in the Midwestern United States of America in the 1980's, those farmers who were able to cope and hold their own were the ones who were inclined to voluntary associations, the greatest among which was the church as a religious institution (Umoh, 1985). In that crisis condition, religion played its role as a mediating institution between the individual victims and the mega structures of the larger society, the equivalents of the oil companies in the Niger Delta region until the crises were over and the people resumed their normal daily life. Religion was also the effective tool used by the Indian Ghandi and the American Martin Luther King, Jr. to enforce non-violent revolutions that led to the unprecedented social change in the two societies.

Nelson (1986) in support of the above claims, has listed the following instances whereby religion has been effectively used to redress societal problems: In the United States of America, in the 1960s, the Rev. Martin Luther King and the Southern Christian Leadership played a leading role in the establishing of civil rights and securing Legislation intended to reduce racial discrimination;

in the 1960s also, a number of radical revolutionary groups emerged within the Roman catholic Church in Latin American.

They preached liberation theology arguing that it was a duty of church members to fight against unjust and oppressive right-wing dictatorships. Thus in 1979 Catholic revolutionaries supported the Sandinistas when they seized control in Nicaragua; In Poland the Roman Catholic Church opposed the communist state, and supported the attempt of the free trade union towards the needed solidarity in the Polish society; in South Africa, Archbishop Desmond Tutu played a prominent role in the extermination of apartheid; in Iran, Islamic fundamentalism played a prominent part in the 1979 revolution led by the Ayatollah Khomeni.

Max Weber was certainly correct to emphasize the unsettling and often revolutionary impact of religious ideals upon established social order. In spite of the Church's early support for slavery in the United States, Church leaders played a key role in fighting to abolish the institution. Religious beliefs have been known to support social movements seeking to overthrow unjust systems of authority, and in the 1960's religious sentiments promoted the civil rights movements.

Our civil governments must learn to take the church and indeed, all religious organizations into confidence and see them as genuine partners in progress. The government must acknowledge the necessary intervention role of the religious institution in the building of the whole human person, his emotion, sentiment, psychology, soul and physic. It is the only way the individual can, with contentment, contribute his quota toward the building of the nation. That is the only way that progress engendered by peace will be guaranteed in the Niger Delta, that is, by partnering with the church as a religious institution. It is high time we recognized that physical structure development is not all there is to a fulfilled human life.

Policies have to be put in place to support and strengthen the religious institution and, if need be, fiscal appropriation extended to the religious bodies to improve and enhance their greater performance and operation to the benefit of the entire nation. Of course, the above position does not absolve the federal government from playing its role of "pater familias" by ensuring justice and fairplay in the distribution of social amenities to its citizenry. The youth of the Niger Delta, on the other hand, while not being encouraged to continue in their militant tendency, must be understood from the point of view of the ancient wisdom which states… "when it comes to the defense of one's fatherland and property, there is no question of just or unjust action".

In matters of religion and social and civic responsibilities, religious organizations should be encouraged to use religion to fight unjust social arrangements. Although religion is primarily a system of beliefs and worship, with God as its direct object, it is not an institution that is to be regarded as entirely out of tune with real life and mundane struggles. Some biblical passages may advice the separation of religion from politics (1 Corinthians, 7:20-24; 1Peter, 2:12-17; Mark, 12:17), yet these do not advocate Christian indifference to political activities.

If Christians are directed to respect and obey the government and the civil authority because they are appointed by God (Romans, 13:1-4), it means it is God who ordained politics, and government is another name for politics.

From the example of Jesus, it is clear that his message brought hope and relief to the hungry, the sick, the poor, the marginalized and those in despair. Where oppressive social structures were concerned, He confronted those structures accordingly.

Religious leaders in the Niger Delta and their followerships should speak out against the unjust structures of the region for

"religious worship has no meaning when it becomes mere conformism at the expense of the real and authentic commitment to the good of others, especially the needy" (Odey, 1999). Nonviolent resistance, as political tools for social change used by the Hindu Saint, Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. consisted in criticizing oppressive political regimes. Religious organizations in the Niger Delta should adopt the same approach in an attempt to secure justice for the people. The violent words of Christ, when occasions demanded were always addressed to those in authority, who oppressed the voiceless.

The Church should be assisted to position itself as to be always in the defense of the voiceless in the present situation in the Niger Delta. This the State could do by encouraging the religious institution to partner with it through allocating funds to strengthen its mission of evangelization and impacting on individual consciences in its ethical and moral mission.

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