

A HISTORICAL REVIEW OF THE ISAAC ADAKA BORO REVOLUTION AND THE NIGER DELTA QUESTION

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Abstract

This paper has examined the situation in the Niger Delta region, which prompted Isaac Adaka Boro to carry out a revolt against the Federal Military Government of Nigeria in 1966. The essay reviewed and x-rayed the marginalization of the region in the political affairs of the country and the consequential misery and poverty peoples of the region. The dynamics of political and economic power in the region which sustained the oppression are also discussed. It is argued that the exposure of the people to life of want and misery necessitated the need to turn their sources of frustration into instruments of development of the region with revolution. The study argues the governments create an environment for accelerated development by properly restructuring the federation called Nigeria to give room to resource control.

Keywords: Historical review, Isaac Boro, revolution, Niger Delta, restructuring.

Introduction

The evident despoliation and degradation of the Niger Delta environment without compassion condemned the vulnerable people, particularly the women, to life of poverty and deprivation in view of the fact that their sources of livelihood – hitherto fertile land for farming and water for fishing - have been destroyed. Marginalisation and political exclusion of the people from national affairs had exposed the people to life of want and hopelessness as there were no jobs for them, especially on the educational system that was prostrate, thus further disempowering them.

This development provided the background for the youth crisis, which has characterised the region since 1966, which culminated in the Isaac Adaka Boro-led revolt. The Boro revolution was aimed at liberating the region and obtaining free access to the benefits accruing from oil and gas resources exploited from the region. The revolt failed but remains a landmark in the history of the region and ethnonationalism in Nigeria, evident in how it inspired many social movements and declarations of Bills of Rights such as the Ogoni Bill of Rights. This Bill sought political autonomy and the right to control their God-govern resources. Other Bills of Rights included those of Urhobo, and Itsekiri Bills of Rights.¹

This study begins with a brief profile of Boro and what could have triggered his revolt against the state and oil companies with evident severance of the Niger Delta region from the rest parts of the country, and then what followed thereafter-the Twelve Day rebellion or war and the government's response. The study would also demonstrate how Boro's legacy evident in the way his action inspired subsequent generations of Niger Delta people. The last part of the study is the conclusion.

A Brief Profile of Isaac Adaka Boro

Isaac Adaka Boro was an Ijaw youth who came of age to begin to appreciate the dilemma his Ijaw ethnic group in the Niger Delta region, found itself within the Nigerian geo-political space, and even the situation of Nigeria generally in relation to political developments. Born on September 10, 1938, he hailed from Kaiama in Bayelsa State, a town, which later acquired both social and political significance in the context of the crises that have bedeviled the region over time.²

He began his life career as a teacher in January 1958 in the mission school at Amassoma and even rose to the position of an assistant headmaster where his father was the headmaster. He later resigned his appointment to join the Nigeria Police Force out of personal convictions, especially after witnessing a police raid on his school. The raid was occasioned by the women riots over the imposition of heavy levies on school pupils due to the failure of the free education system in the eastern region, which was modelled after that put in place by Obafemi Awolowo in the western region.³

Perhaps, among other things, for want of educational advancement, Boro again resigned from the police force when he gained admission into

University of Nigeria, Nsukka, to study chemistry. That was on September 21, 1961 at the age of twenty-three. At the university, he later became the president of the students' union government that was characterised with ethnic sentiment.

While still in the university, Boro considered the plight of the Niger Delta people, especially after discovering that political manifestoes were structured to favour the so-called major ethnic groups: the Hausa, Fulani, Yoruba and Igbo. In October 1962, therefore, he assembled seven of his school mates from the Niger Delta area to discuss the political future of his people. From thence, they called themselves the "Internal Circus" which later metamorphosed into the Niger Delta Volunteer Service (NDVS).⁴

This phenomenon he created cost him his educational pursuit as he abandoned the degree programme in chemistry to continue the struggle, with the "Internal Circus" of protecting the Niger Delta's God-given resources from internal and external exploiters and, perhaps, to ensure environmental-friendly region, and the Twelve-Day Rebellion against the state could not be delayed any further. He, thus, proclaimed the Niger Delta region a republic-Niger Delta People's Republic on February 23, 1966. The Twelve-Day Rebellion started. The federal ruling government under General J.T.U. Aguiyi-Ironsi brought Boro's revolt to its knees. He and his compatriots were arrested, tried and found guilty of treason. The Gowon military administration, which came on board on August 1, 1966, granted them pardon. During the Nigerian Civil War, which broke out in July 1967, Boro joined the federal side against the secessionist Republic of Biafra, but was killed in controversial circumstances on May 16, 1968.^{5a}

Some Previous Notable Rebellions in the Niger Delta Region

It is important to note, for the purpose of this study, that before 1966 some level of restlessness, due to commercial relations, had been very evident in the Niger Delta region. This development was ever before the discovery of crude oil. The soured relationship at that point in time was due to the way the Royal Niger Company (RNC) got itself involved in the palm-oil trade relations with the kingdoms in the region. Injustice characterised the relationship. The development was evident when Nembe people, under King William Koko, revolted against the company in 1894-1895 and King Nana Olomu of Itsekiri also did in 1896. They resisted the company's attempt at shutting them out of

the trade in palm-oil. The people's attempt at demanding for legitimacy, justice and, perhaps, survival, led to a gun-boat attack on Nembe people at Akassa, and against the Itsekiri at Ebrohimi.^{5b} These are just but a few examples. These revolts seem to have sign-posted what were to come in subsequent years.

Political Situation in Nigeria by 1964

The political development in Nigeria, which partly inspired the Boro revolution could be seen from what he noted in his prison memoirs entitled the *Twelve-Day Revolution* (1981), where he stated that:

In 1964, as if an answer to the crises of the minority elements of Nigeria, the country had degenerated into a political inferno. It was a time when anything that was right became wrong, a time when two wrongs made a right and two rights a wrong. The political poise of the country was in a riddle of uncertainties.

I do not know exactly whether people give as much thought to the dangers in extreme greed. Greed in its extreme, had been the cause of the upheavals in many nations. What incited the peasant revolt of 1831 in England? Indeed, Britain's loss of the American Colonies in 1776? Further still, the dreadful French Revolutions? or the second World War? Greed! The troubles in Nigeria were principally caused by the same monster.⁶

Besides, he stated that:

By 1965, it was a popular boast in some circles that... three tribes controlled Nigeria. They had a firm grip in their tribal zones. One could tell what the results of an election would be in the East, West or North, even before the campaigns started....

Election manifestoes promised the high heavens and politics an affair of people without conscience (and)

democracy was ravishly (sic) raped and the foundation of the nation was rocked. Nigeria was built on shifting sand from the word go, torn as it was amongst the most monstrous social and political vices. There grew a class of persons riding from obscure poverty to aristocracy and fame; they were tribally bound and socially indebted to one clique or the other. The club, like a colossus, held the fortunes of the nation in its palm.⁷

The above situation in the country had impacted in the youths, strong feelings of hopelessness and, thus, Boro “was not an exception”⁸ Besides the above post-independence challenges faced by Nigeria, one very critical challenge still existed. Crude oil had come to supplement forest products, and with particular reference to the Niger Delta region, this new product tended to redefine the economic content of the region and it was exploited mindlessly without any consideration of the value of life in the area. Thus, in recognition of the above situation, Boro began the attempt at exposing Niger Delta region and its people to the world with a view to freeing them from internal colonialists and continuous exploitation of their resources by multinational oil companies. To achieve this desire, he formed an organisation called “Integral WXYZ” at 67, Malu Road, Apapa, Lagos. According to him, these non-magical letters represented a complexity of field operation,⁹ being carried out by the Niger Delta Oil Council, saddled with the responsibility to “Intimate the oil companies of their continued atrocities to our people and their wicked reluctance to improve the lot of the people they were bound to associate with for long”.¹⁰ The “WXYZ” continued to operate from Lagos office and could have attained a commanding height in its objectives but for the January 15, 1966 military coup d’état.¹¹

The formation of the NDVS and the Revolt

During the crisis and conflict following the January coup d’état, Boro left Lagos for his home town, Kaiama, Bayelsa State, to defend the existence of his “people against an impending tribal holocaust”.¹² Thereafter, he began to recruit able-bodied youths with which he formed the Niger Delta Volunteer Service of about 200¹³ strong, a militant group aimed at liberating the region, through arm confrontation, from the claws of the state and severing it from the

rest parts of the country, and with the hope of sustaining itself thereafter. The NDVS had some weeks of training before it was ready for the revolution. Boro drove home his motivations with words of inspirations, which he articulated thus:

If a shoe pinches, one does not wait for a cobbler to stroll from door to door to inquire whose shoe has a nail in it. It was, therefore, better to call the attention of the world to the fact that the inhabitants of the Niger Delta in Nigeria were feeling very uncomfortable with a nail.¹⁴

On the eve of the operation, he boosted the morale of his recruit by telling them, among other things;

Today is a great day, not only in our lives, but also in the history of the Niger Delta. Perhaps, it will be the greatest day for a long time. This is not because we are going to demonstrate to bring heavens down, but because we are going to demonstrate to the world what and how we feel about oppression. Before today, we are branded robbers, bandits, terrorists or gangsters but after today, we shall be heroes of our land.¹⁵

He went further to advise his men not to commit atrocities such as rape, looting or robbery; they should maintain integrity; and not to mess about with women during the revolution or war as that was against Ijaw tradition. He also told them that they should not get themselves defiled within the period of battle, so that they could return home safe even if they failed. He finally tied the venture to God and he prayed: "May God bring success to our endeavour A-men".¹⁶

Having prepared for the task ahead, on January 23, 1966, the NDVS declared the region a Niger Delta People's Republic. Immediately after, the military government under Aguiyi-Ironsi mobilised and quelled the revolt after twelve days of battle with the secessionist. The twelve-day battle has been seen as the first civil war in post-Independence Nigeria.¹⁷ At the end, Boro and some of his men were arrested, tried and found guilty of treason and then sentenced to death. But before they could be executed, the July 29, 1966 coup d'état took

place. Lt. Colonel Yakubu Gowon who assumed the leadership of the country granted them pardon on August 4, 1966.¹⁸

One factor said to be responsible for the revolt was an anti-Igbo feeling of domination and marginalisation in the old eastern region. So, with the feeling, Boro and his cohorts declared the region independent of the rest parts of Nigeria. Besides the fact that it was the ruling administration under Gowon, which granted Boro and his men pardon, it was because of the perceived marginalisation and domination of the area by the Igbo that made Boro to decide to fight on the side of the federal government during the Nigerian Civil War.¹⁹

Secondary, the revolt as a liberation movement was aimed at freeing the Niger Delta Region from the federation due to the federal government's neglect and marginalisation of the region, as well as the senseless, insensitive exploration and exploitation of crude oil leading to the continuous degradation, environmental pollution, and, thus, destruction of the hitherto good network of streams and rivers, and fertile landall of which, hitherto made the ecosystem to favourable for fishing, farming and even hunting as their major occupations and sources of livelihood.^{19b} There was also the issue of the quest for state creation. Available evidence suggests how there was "support for creation of states out of the four regions, and Nigeria's political history had witnessed many such demands. The Isaac Boro rebellion in the Eastern Region's Delta area during the Ironsi regime was a reaction to many years of fruitless effort to convince the government to create more states".²⁰ Despite the Boro affair, the degradation of the environment continued and so the agitation for environmental friendly and, later against the lopsided revenue allocation formular continued and has persisted.

Boro's Rebellion, A Precursor to the Kaiama Declaration of 1998

It is important to note that although Boro's attempt lasted for only twelve days, it was a landmark in the history of the region. The failure of the attempt to bring positive changes into the region resulted in later years in the formation of the Ijaw Youth Council (IYC), made up of Ijaw militant groups with the aim of fighting for justice and equity, thus continuing from where Boro stopped. Thus, the crux of their struggle was in relation to the social neglect, economic and political marginalisation and underdevelopment of Ijaw land in particular and the Niger Delta area in general.²¹ The "Egbesu Boys of Africa" was, and still,

organised as the fighting arm of the council. This organised and cohesive military wing of the Council was sustained by the various sub-groups of the Council. With the organisation of the “Egbesu Boys” and the entry of the youths into the struggle for environmental justice and equity, the delta region was turned into a platform of mass mobilisation and militancy, as it witnessed a more vigorous campaign, shut-down and take-over of oil installations, abductions of oil and non-oil personnel, and seizure of oil facilities and crafts. Thus, it was within this crucible of widespread social exasperation that militant Ijaw ethnic movement was born and nurtured.²²

Within the crucible, the IYC began to engage the state in arm confrontation with its militant wing, a development which reached its climax on December 11, 1998, when they met at Kaiama, Boro’s town, in a general convention. Here, they issued a document, otherwise known as the Kaiama Bill of Rights or Declaration, addressed to the state and oil companies operating in the region, requesting for local control of oil revenue and better environmental practices. In the document, they suggested the need for the federation to be run on the basis of equality of ethnic nationalities and social justice.²³ They gave an ultimatum up to December 30, 1998. With the expiration of the ultimatum, the “Egbesu Boys” revolted and engaged the military government under General Abdusalami Abubakar in armed confrontation. The “Egbesu Boys” suffered heavy casualties and many of them retreated to Odi.²⁴ However, despite the defeat the Kaiama Declaration succeeded in making a significant impact in projecting the demands of the people of the Niger Delta.

Since the epic Kaiama Declaration with evident failure to achieve its aim, the struggle in the region has been characterised by a protracted war of hostage-taking, disruption of oil operations, open hostilities and destruction of communities. One self-evident truth about this development was the unrestrained destruction of Odi, one of the communities in Bayelsa State with evident mindless massacre of its men, women and children by the Olusegun Obasanjo-led federal government in 1999. The action was occasioned by the abduction and killing of twelve police officers in that community.²⁵

Boro’s Rebellion and the Niger Delta Question

From what Boro did, he was compelled to embark on the struggle because of the perceived Igbo domination of the politics of the region, and the

years of exploitation and underdevelopment of the region. Besides, since the major challenge facing the region had to do with the natural resources therein, the control of the resources by the federal government based on its own terms rather than the people of the region, and the mindless destruction of the environment by the oil companies, Boro decided to take up arms for a better deal. Thus, the call for resource control²⁶ was foreseen by Boro then. He, therefore, took up arms to insist on the need for the people to control their resources for effective development as other people or groups in other regions had done with their own to develop their areas.

Boro had lived and died while struggling for the emancipation of the Ijaw in particular and Niger Delta people in general from extinction due to the destruction of their region because of oil and gas exploitation. The Ijaw people, obviously have good reasons to remember him as their first person, with his militia group, to express disgust with the existing political structuration and power relations. This he did through arm confrontation with evident assertion and short-lived political autonomy. He dared the state with a view to addressing the issues of oppression, social injustice and neglect, in spite of the enormous economic contribution of such people to national growth and development. He was the first person to use arms to re-invigorate ethnic nationalism in post-independence Nigeria, but the action attracted counter-mobilisation.²⁷

The Niger Delta People's Republic, which he declared independent, collapsed after twelve days of engagement in battle with the federal government. The collapse was due to the fact that it could not have stood the test of time with an ill-equipped and ill-trained 200 militia, which in turn could not have stood the ferocious fire-power of the federal might at that time. However, while declaring the defunct republic independent, he noted in his proclamation addressed to his people that:

We need your support for our venture, not for ourselves, but for yourselves and the generations to come....We have not come to separate but to unite the scattered years. However, no subversion will be condoned and we expect that shortly after, all hands will be on deck to salvage on sinking nationality.²⁸

But one shocking thing about Boro was that he was ready to live and die for his people.

Boro, having reactivated the seeming dying ethnic nationalism in Nigeria, and set the ball rolling, the later freedom fighters, as they called themselves in the region, hinged their struggle on what he left behind. He saw the need to use force to achieve the dream of the Niger Delta people, but Ken Saro-Wiwa who followed his footsteps to free the Ogoni from mindless exploitation of Ogoni land decided to use intellectual power. He also failed but his ideology continues to resonate all over the region. The next generation of freedom fighters seem to have combined both ideas of the use of gun and intellect to drive home their points, thus sustaining the ideological stance of their predecessors.

From available evidence, there have been two major revolts since 1966 drawing inspiration from that of Boro. There was one led by Saro-Wiwa, 1993-1995, which sought to protect the Ogoni Bill of Rights, which not only declared some autonomy for themselves but also hinged on seeking adequate local participation in the exploitation and utilisation of resources domiciled in Ogoni land,²⁹ and of course the well-known Ijaw youths and Kaiama Declaration of 1998 and the arm confrontation with the federal military government in January 1999. It is important to stress the import of the Ogoni Bill of Rights, which claimed that in spite of the huge amount of money to the tune of \$30 billion, derived from the land, little or no infrastructure existed in the land to justify such extraction; the people had no representation whatsoever in institutions of the federal government; the people lacked education, health and other social facilities; and it was intolerable that one of the richest areas of Nigeria should wallow in abject poverty and destitution.³⁰ At the end, Saro-Wiwa died while fighting for freedom for his people. He was judiciously murdered by the military junta led by General Sani Abacha in 1995.³¹ Boro and Saro-Wiwa's struggles, no doubt, vividly reflected the fears expressed by the minority groups in the emerging Nigeria state in 1957 through Henry Willinks' report.

For the sake of emphasis, from available evidence in relation to the interventionist efforts of government since the Willinks Commission of 1957 through the establishment of Niger Delta Development Board (NDDDB), Oil Minerals Producing Areas Development Commission (OMPADEC), Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC), the 13% Revenue Derivation, which

is a peanut, the Niger Delta Ministry to the Amnesty Programme, all of which aimed at sustaining peace in the region, not much seem to have changed in the region. The reasons for this situation were because all the efforts were severely limited by under-achievement; corruption, as the money meant for the development of the region ended in individuals' pockets; and a greater emphasis being placed on politics rather than development.³²

The bottom line of the above situation is that, to a large extent, life in the region is still prostrate as it was when Boro tried to save his people from life of want and misery in the midst of plenty. This situation has again given size to a more aggressive youth freedom fighters who have continued the struggle where Boro and Saro-Wiwa left it. This development is notwithstanding the fact that amnesty was granted to them to lay down their arms to sustain peace in the region. Thereafter, as they agreed in Urhombigbe in Edo State to destroy the guns and bury them. Finally, all that reminded them of the ugly past, they prayed that it was their fervent desire "that never again" would their people in the Niger Delta, or any part of Nigeria for that matter, resort to militant agitations.³³ Thus, it is no wonder that the failure of governments' interventionist efforts have invigorated some activities of the youths such as kidnapping for ransom and pipeline vandalism, which may not stop as envisioned any time soon.

Conclusion

We have articulated in this study the selfless service and sacrifice Isaac Adaka Boro put forward to combat the marginalisation and oppression of the Niger Delta region and people. Although Boro is dead, the heroism of his struggle has produced many people-oriented programmes for the region. But because of bad governance and corruption, the performances of such programmes have left much to be desired as there is still evident arrested development in the region.

However, we could say that although the Boro struggle did not succeed and has led to the death of many youths, it inspired many of them to continue the struggle from where he stopped; it has helped to inspire new ideas in the way the Ijaw, in particular, and the Niger Delta people as a whole see themselves, the governments and the oil companies to appreciate who are their problems. Thus, the Twelve-Day Revolution remains of great importance in the annals of

the history of the region. Finally, it is our wish to say that one simple solution to the issues that Boro attempted to address would be to allow self-government within Nigeria to enable individual groups to meet their needs and interest, and, thus, end internal colonialism, the unfair and exploitative character of the Nigeria social and productive relations. It would also help to end the structural imbalance and defect of the federal system.

End Notes

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2. It was at Kaiama that Isaac Adaka Boro began to recruit his militia group; it was there that the Ijaw Youth Congress (IYC) was born with the convocation of the Ijaw Youths; and it was there that the Kaiama Declaration was proclaimed in December 1998.
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7. Boro, *The Twelve-Day Revolution*: 73-74.
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9. Boro, *The Twelve-Day Revolution*: 86-87
10. Boro, *The Twelve-Day Revolution*: 87
11. Boro, *The Twelve-Day Revolution*: 88
12. Boro, *The Twelve-Day Revolution*: 88
13. Boro, *The Twelve-Day Revolution*: 114
14. Boro, *The Twelve-Day Revolution*: 115.
15. Boro, *The Twelve-Day Revolution*: 116; see also Godemi G. Darah, "Boro and Jackson: Alliance across the Atlantic", *The Guardian*, Lagos, London, June 3, 2013:99.
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- the Resource Control Conflict, 1960-1965: An Assessment of Conflict Handling Styles” in Isaac Olawole Albert (ed.) *Perspectives on Peace and Conflict in Africa: Essays in Honour of General (Dr.) Abudsalami Abubakar*, Ibadan, Peace and Conflict Studies Programme, Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan, 2005:172.
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