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Minority Rights and Resource-Conflict in the Poetry of Ibiwari Ikiriko, Nnimmo Bassey and Ogaga Ifowodo

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Abstract

Minority rights appear to be more contentious wherever resource-distribution is contested. Oil and Power are linked inextricably in the poetry that Ibiwari Ikiriko, Nnimmo Bassey and Ogaga Ifowodo have written on the Niger Delta mosaic. Power determines control and dispossession. Thus, these poets have depicted the attitude of the state and its centres of control towards the condition of the oil-bearing communities. The exercise of state might is cast as a strategy of repression which is designed to ensure accumulation for the state and its privileged entities. This essay is to examine the extent to which the poems of Ikiriko, Bassey and Ifowodo stand as mirrors on various sites of tension and conflict in the Niger Delta.

Introduction

Ibiwari Ikiriko, Nnimmo Bassey and Ogaga Ifowodo are poets of the Niger Delta extraction. They hail from the region of Nigeria which is situated “between the estuaries of the Benin River to the west and the Cross River to the east of the Niger River itself” (Daminabo 285). The region is a home to a huge deposit of oil and gas. The region is also the hotbed of resource-conflict. It is evident that resource-conflict features strongly in the poetry of Ikiriko, Bassey and Ifowodo. Many examples can be found in Ikiriko’s *Oily Tears of the Delta* (2000), Bassey’s *We Thought It Was Oil but It Was Blood* (2002), and Ifowodo’s *The Oil Lamp* (2005).

Of Images and Context: The Niger Delta Situation

Ikiriko's *Oily Tears* is a collection of thirty poems, twenty-three of which are on the oil motif. Given that the poet has said that the other seven poems have been added to the collection to "sublimate the stench of gasoline on the pages" (7), whatever that means, it is obvious where the premium lies. The poet has stated that the poems in the collection "are a witness to the depredations of the Delta and a support for a claim of courage to halt the pillage" (7). This is the position which gives deep insight into the problems of the oil-producing region. Ikiriko says that this concern has been marked on his poetry for "almost two decades; the first of them ('Evening Already') having been written in 1980, and the last 'Odi' in December 1999" (7). The poet is very precise about his objective: "The oil boom in Nigeria has meant a doom for the Niger Delta. The doom is now beginning to burst in blood. Decidedly oil in feel and deal, a great majority of poems in this collection ought to assist the staunching process if ever it will come" (7). The poet has declaimed his purpose in clear terms, a sense of mission towards the Niger Delta, stoked by the urgency of the situation. "Evening Already" has the indices of that urgency. The persona grapples with his "cares / Clamping weight of cares" (26-7). And he is "resolved / not to be wasted by time" (53-4) because "it is evening already / And the arena is past ready" (114-15). The persona carries the burden of a message, and he feels that time is running out. He reiterates his mission in the third segment of the poem: "Let me tell / The story... / Of the mini minor" who is: "Marginalized by the mighty and plenty. / Of pipes that / Forever pipe out, never in (92-3,100-03). The persona is angered by the marginalization/dispossession of the nations of the Niger Delta. He is anxious to get involved, to tell the story as a form of engagement. In the last segment of the poem, he curses the oppressors and their progeny to suffer in the same manner as they have treated the Niger Delta.

"Evening Already" sets the stage for the rest of the poems in the collection. The poems that follow can be put in loose categories. There are general poems that take a broad sweep at the Niger Delta situation. There are poems on specific places/institutions like the ones entitled "Okara's Nun," "Oloibiri," "Ompadec," "Ogoni Agony" and "Odi." There are tribute poems/incidental poems like "To Dappa-Biriye on the Jubilee," "For Ken," "Remembering Saro-Wiwa," "To Alfred Diete-Spiff" and "Rivers at 25." There are poems that stop at telling the woes of the Niger Delta. And there are those that evince hope. Like "Evening Already," there are poems of the participant "I/We" speaker, and there are also poems of the omniscient voice.

The "I" speaker in the poem entitled "Ikikali" is a personification of the "rocket-seed...of the mangrove" (1-3). It states the circumstances of its birth and the challenges of its environment – gas flare blinds it and oil-sludge chokes it. "Ikikali" connects "Oily Rivers" in that the speaker in the first can be argued to be extended to

the latter. As the title indicates, the speaker in “Oily Rivers” is of the Oily Rivers, and he speaks of the Oily Rivers, a pun that draws on centuries-old of oil-determinism in the Niger Delta. He decries the degradation of his environment: “the base Delta / where things are made base / and beings become base” (4-6). This is because the Delta is run by “policies / crude as petroleum” (8-9). The matter is further accentuated in the second stanza where the persona introduces himself: “I am of / the Oil Rivers...” (10-11). He says that the Oil Rivers is a place “where rivers are / oily” and where rivers “can / neither / quench my thirst” nor “anoint my head” (12-18). The tone of “Oily Rivers” is downright plaintive, perhaps despair is the word. And this is recurrent in many of the poems in Ikiriko’s collection. The Niger Delta is depicted as a region that has no grip on its condition. In “Baseless Compass,” the speaker states that all of the Niger Delta’s “rights / and benefits [are] suspended” (3-4) as it sails in Nigeria’s “ship of state” (10). In poems like “Under Pressure” and “Top Upon Bottom,” the personae enunciate the burden / pressure on the Niger Delta. The last two lines of “Under Pressure” read: “O what a full tide of pressure / Brim they over our land and persons” (12-13). The pressure comes from oil facilities that have upset traditional means of livelihood and have created no alternatives. The Niger Delta bears the pressure of Nigeria’s economy, and the economies of allied nations. The graphic example is accentuated by Nigeria’s map – the entire country sits on the Niger Delta, “Top Upon Bottom,” as the poem says. This suppression is a game of numbers. It has robbed the Niger Delta of the power to control its affairs. The poem entitled “The Minority Man” says that the “Minor Minority Man” is impotent in Nigeria because of numerical disadvantage. The Minority Man is: “Bound to fewness / Manacled by the tyranny of numbers / Out-numbered and outmanoeuvred” (10-12). The next stanza restates the same point: the “Mini Minor Minority Man” is said to be “Impotent in boardrooms / Having neither say nor way / Marginal in things” (13-16).

“The Minority Man” evinces the pathetic condition of an emasculated Niger Delta. The portrait is that bleak. It is similar to the images in “Them and Us” and “The Palm and the Crude” which evince surrender. The persona in “Them and Us” is angry but he leaves his case to God, as “jaki the ass / said to its Sahelian Drover” (1-2). And the persona in “The Palm and the Crude” shows pathetic ignorance of history, glosses over the upheavals that attended the era of palm oil and the connections in the present, and depicts a detestable portrait of surrender. In lines 34- 39, he says: “we, Aborigines / Of the riverside” are “bereft” and “stoic,” as we “Wash our palms / With dry spittle” and “As legs move up / To tie hands”. They must be indeed a supine people who tie their own hands in the face of oppression. This is the attitude that engenders easy slavery, as the speaker in “Delta Tears” says in the last line.

There is a shift in “Delta Tears.” The speaker moves from merely telling of the agony of the Niger Delta to calling for action. He posits that the Niger Delta has

been utterly dispossessed: “They have confiscated our lives / They have stolen our everything” (35-6). And once again, the condition of the environment is mentioned: “The coated seascape smells / oil and tar and gas” (71-2). He is enraged by this situation, and he calls on the Niger Delta to act: “it is time for / The furry pounce,” he says (10-102). Although he coats his call for violent resistance with *mythopoeisis* and animal-symbolism, he nevertheless hits the point. This is a leap from the poems mentioned previously. “Delta Tears” is in the same frame as “Odi” and “Oily Tears.”

The poem “Odi” laments the destruction of Odi by a Nigerian military expedition in 1999. “Odi” is provoked by the facts of history. The matter that led to this unbridled show of state terror has become common knowledge. Some soldiers and policemen were killed in the Odi area by restive elements. But that did not justify the scale of destruction inflicted on Odi. The poem says: “O, a brazen demolition of our land and lives / Has replaced the foxy looting of our lot / As the tactics shift from marginalization to pacification” (24-6). In spite of this brutal programme of repression, the people’s will is said to be unbroken: “as no tears can rend a calabash of community will, / So will Odi rise again” (27-8). Odi has joined the list of Niger Delta communities that have faced the destructive fire of the Nigerian state on the account of oil. And the poem represents a grievous example of state extremism in the Niger Delta area. For a government in search of purported criminals to destroy an entire community is as crazy as a man who burns down a house full of people just to get at rats. The poem condemns the act of state terror, and avows that Odi will rise again. It evinces hope that Odi’s cry will one day come to a stop, like the cry of the Niger Delta in “Oily Tears.” “These oily tears,” says the speaker, “Dripping down the tears on your depressed face / Will one day be staunched, / I swear!” (2-4). Why does the persona swear? What is the anchor for such a faith? Is it hoped that the Federal Government will be more sensitive in the future? Is it hoped that the transnational firms will become humane in their industrial practices in the years ahead? Is it faith in the capacity of the nations of the Niger Delta to keep up the fight and to remain unbroken in the face of oppression? How is this kind of hope to be gauged given that people suffer more pain each time they rise in protest? Odi calls up the case of Ogoni. The Ogoni experience is just as fresh as the Odi saga, and both experiences are similar. Both experiences show that the path of freedom is the path of sacrifice. Losses and pain are key indices of resistance. And faith is necessary in any crusade for civil rights; faith in the values of the struggle. That kind of faith is what the persona sees in the lot of Odi. It is also seen in the career of Saro-Wiwa and the Ogoni too.

Ikiriko has three poems on Saro-Wiwa and the Ogoni in *Oily Tears*. The poems are “Remembering Saro-Wiwa,” “For Ken” and “Ogoni Agony.” The poems depict Saro-Wiwa and Ogoni as resistant-entities who have suffered for their agitation. The speaker in “Remembering Saro-Wiwa” states clearly: “Let’s not forget / that Saro-

Wiwa / was a writer” (1-3). The point here is that a writer is a “righter.” The next stanza makes it clear: “Let’s not forget / that Saro-Wiwa / was a righter” (6-8). The poem goes further to say that the writer/righter is hanged for the sake of “oil-wells” (15), and that his death sticks to “our conscience / like sludges on mudflat” (19-20). Saro-Wiwa’s death is described as a great loss in the poem entitled “For Ken.” The poem calls him a “wordsmith” and a “compressed giant” whose essence is larger than his size (1-6). The same terms are used in “Ogoni Agony,” a poem which really links Saro-Wiwa’s activism to his people. “Ogoni Agony” speaks on the marginality of the Ogoni: “Except on oil field charts / The land is hardly on the maps” (1-2). The lines point to state neglect. This situation motivates Saro-Wiwa – “a compressed giant” (8) and “a wordsmith” (11) – to sow “seeds of awakening” (12) which has pushed the Ogoni “to [the] centre stage / Of international understanding” (33-4), until eventually the awakening “is de-roded / and ditched” (36-7). Although the Ogoni activism has been ditched by internal cracks – instigated by government and transnational interests – the poem evinces faith in the resilience of the people: “the ditch is but tentative” (48). It is a strong sense of faith to believe that a repressed people will rise from a ditch and keep the fight alive.

There is a similar kind of faith in Bassey’s title-poem, “We Thought It Was Oil...But it Was Blood” (the title-poem of the collection). Bassey’s poem is a testimonial to unbroken will-power even when the struggle demands the supreme sacrifice. “They may kill all,” the speaker says, “But the blood will speak / They may gain all / But the soil will RISE” (63-6). This resolve points to “the courage of men and women who daily fight for their rights...communities...the environment, justice and equality” (7), as Esperanza Martinez states (in his foreword to Bassey’s collection). Ikiriko and Bassey have a common backcloth. They are both poets of Niger Delta extraction. They both have concern for what oil exploration has done to the nations of the Niger Delta.

As in Ikiriko’s *Oily Tears*, Bassey’s *We Thought It Was Oil* is also strong on the oil motif. Martinez says that Bassey’s collection “creates poetry from pipelines that destroy the soul of the forest, the towers that bleed the earth and leave it without a future, the fires that burn the past and the memory of a people, until we are strangers in our land” (6-7). Bassey is a seasoned environmental activist of global standing, and his activism has rubbed off on the poems in this collection. Although his concern is quite broad, some of the poems are addressed specifically to the Niger Delta situation. Besides the title poem which is dedicated to Oronto Douglas and the youths of the Niger Delta, poems like “When the Earth Bleeds” and “The United Niger Delta Oil Co.” show how powerful forces pursue oil-profit at the expense of the environment and the people.

The people in the title-poem decry the link between the Nigerian state and the transnational oil explorers. The system of repression has calcified over time, and this has limited the options for redress. “We see their Shells,” says the speaker, “Behind military shields / Evil, horrible, gallows called oilrigs / Drilling our blood” (44-7). Again, the speaker adds: “We thought it was oil / But it was blood” (48-9). The alliance between the transnational oil firms and the Nigerian government is marked by the use of military might against the peoples of the Niger Delta. The barrel of the gun ensures the barrel of oil by all means. And the “military shields” (45) make the transnational firms to be irresponsible to the people and the environment. As the people bleed in “We thought It Was Oil but It Was Blood,” so does the environment bleed in “When the Earth Bleeds” where the speaker says “In reality check / Oil makes life stop” because “oil only flows / When the earth bleeds” (3-5).

The harmful practices that bleed the earth are gas flaring, oil spillage, indiscriminate laying of pipelines through (or close to) human settlements, destruction of farmlands during exploratory activities, destruction of aquatic life through water pollution, etc. Bassey’s “The United Niger Delta Oil Co.” makes bold to plainly name the culprits. They are “Shell, Exxon-Mobil, Texaco, NNPC, / Elf, Chevron, Agip, Statoil and similar entities” who have all “agreed” that “the most desired entity of all” is the “United Niger Delta Oil Company incorporated” (9-12). This is the incorporation of greed and pillage. The “United Niger Delta Oil Company incorporated” (12) is a metaphor for corporate pillage which “Opens its claws and rigs and [has] climbed abroad platforms,” and has “Shared and divided the land and the sea” (13-14). It has taken “the entire coasts of our country / Loving best the heart beating in her waist: the delta” (15-16). The pillagers are powerful and ruthless. “They [have] re-christened [the Niger Delta] their property; they have called it the “savage land of the uncontacted / The savage land of the blind / The savage land of the powerless saboteurs” (17-20). The poem strongly accuses the transnational firms of sharing the Niger Delta as booty amongst them. They keep “sailing off with [their] booty of dollars, greed and crude / Rejoicing with the junta” for “the spoils of war” (66-7). The league between the oil firms and the Nigerian government is again highlighted. The firms and the state have launched a war of attrition on the Niger Delta. This point runs through the corpus of poems on the oil motif, even to Ifowodo’s *The Oil Lamp* which has been hailed as an important contribution to the subject of resource-conflict.

Akpuda has argued that “the rejuvenation that Ifowodo has brought to bear on Nigerian poetry can also be felt in his contribution to the Niger Delta motif as seen in *The Oil Lamp*” (1). “Coming years after poets like Ojaide...Ikiriko and...Bassey have examined this subject in their poetry”, Akpuda avers that “it is amazing that Ifowodo still produces fresh metaphors and turns of expression in his Niger Delta narrative” (1).

Akpuda barely stops short of scoring Ifowodo above every other poet that has written on the Niger Delta experience. But he obviously implies it.

The Oil Lamp is wholly on the Niger Delta. It comprises a prefatory poem entitled “A Waterscape”, followed by a series of five narrative poems which by their organic structure can also be seen as a single poem of many parts: “Jese,” “Odi,” “Ogoni,” “The Pipes War” and “Cesspit of the Niger Delta” (rendered in-text as “Cesspit of the Niger Area”). The last part is “The Agonist” which is a section of four poems dedicated to Ken Saro-Wiwa and his eight compatriots. The four poems of the “The Agonist” are “Let Us Pretend We Can Write It,” “Memory Was His Saviour and His Death,” “Hurry Them into the Grave” and “The Good Pupil.” “A Waterscape” depicts a milieu that is mainly at peace with itself. It stands apart in tone, mood and images. Its environment supports fishermen who “glide” to the comfort of their homes after a day’s work (14-15). This stands contrary to the images of a troubled environment which run through the other poems. Which section of the Niger Delta does “A Waterscape” speak of? Certainly not the Niger Delta in “Jese”, “Odi” and “Ogoni”. It appears that the poet has simply set “A Waterscape” as the image of the Niger Delta before the burden of crude oil? If so, then the contrast is expected to heighten the images of degradation in the poems that follow. Other poems in *The Oil Lamp* show communities that are wounded by oil-and-strife. Each poem tells of government’s insensitivity to the agony of the Niger Delta. Each poem tells of the repressive strategies of a system that is hooked on petroleum-security at the detriment of oil producing areas. The historicity of the events is clear (even as they are appropriated by art), although the narratives are not arranged in a chronological order. Were it to be chronological, the poem entitled “Ogoni” would have come before “Jese.”

“Jese,” headed I to XI, is a long narrative which begins with a victim’s (Odiri’s) account of the Jese fire disaster of 1998, in the reign of Gen. Abdulsalami Abubakar. The speaker states that the inferno had occurred in “the fourteenth month of the fuel crunch” (1). Prior to the fire, the poem says, there has been a scarcity of fuel and related products. And the situation has impacted adversely on the people, even on basic acts like cooking and lighting of houses. The scarcity also fans an atmosphere of racketeering. A broken pipe gives opportunity for the people to scoop petrol and kerosene. This, Odiri says, incenses the government which promptly accuses the people of sabotage. The government issues a warning but the people continue their scoop “till the riot police came /...shooting to disperse the frenzied crowd” (99-100). The riot police is said to have started a fire in the process of crowd dispersal. Although seven stanzas in the seventh section of the poem attempt to examine other possible versions of the incident, Odiri’s account is highly logical, particularly as the government takes pains to put up a suspect defence for the police, and to pass the blame to Jese youths. The government release, as recast in the poem, reads: “For the avoidance of doubt,

government / wishes to make clear that the police / arrived too late to stop the fire” which was “clearly lit as they landed on the scene / by youths detailed for that purpose” (275-79). It is illogical for anyone to say that Jese youths set themselves and their relatives ablaze just to cover up the scoop. The argument falls flat on its face. If anything, it reinforces Odiri’s account. Given the government’s earlier warning and accusation, it is possible that the police may have ignited the scene by gunfire. This may have been done deliberately as a punitive/deterrent measure, or unwittingly as a measure of crowd dispersal. Jese is devastated. Its people and environment are terribly hit: “Charred remains, whole enough to count / bloated bodies fished from creeks, wells and rivers, / totalled a thousand, the record-keepers said” (251-53). But this statistics is said to be “far from where stubborn bones queried the count” (254). For all these, the government sends no relief to Jese. The people are left to mourn their losses. Madam Edoja’s dirge is an example of the state of communal grief: “Oil is my curse; oil is our doom” (286). But Jese is only a fragment of the equation. The poem avows that the inferno is a strategy of *pacification*: “This was the peace plan: death by hunger or fire. / It was fire for Jese, ashes and scars for all” (235-36). It points to the obvious repressive attitude of the Nigerian state towards its oil-bearing peoples. This attitude loses every veneer of subtlety in Ifowodo’s “Odi” where government is at its brazen show of might, even in the civil rule of Chief Olusegun Obasanjo.

In “Odi,” the speaker says that “A battalion of justice scorched its path / to Odi, came to solve by war / a case of homicide” (1-3). Odi suffers at the behest of “the president, / ex-commando, false-star general” (7-8). The poem raises the issues that have been seen in Ikiriko’s poem of the same title, only that the details in Ifowodo’s poem have narrative depth.

The naked show of force in Odi brings about the total destruction of the community. One of the voices in Ifowodo’s poem, Pa Piriye, puts the destruction on equal keel with the 1897 “British punitive expedition / to Benin” (68). Pa Piriye, who was eighteen in the year of that British onslaught, further says: “When British soldiers looted and burned Benin / we cursed strange men come from beyond the sea, / from the land of the dead, so evil they had no skin” (216-18). History is shown to have repeated this experience in postcolonial Odi: “But who shall we curse now, who is the enemy? / My eyes have seen two evils, must not see another” (219-20). The Nigerian state treats Odi as British imperialists treated Benin in 1897 on the account of resource control. The Nigerian president is quoted in the poem to have said that the motivation for the military operation is to “protect... oil wealth at any cost” (206). This explains why several lives are exterminated on the pretext of law enforcement. There is the tenor of triumphalism in the graffiti which the soldiers leave on the broken walls of Odi. It says, “THIS IS THE END OF ODI” (187). This condemnable show of force is

reminiscent of the Ogoni experience. In fact, Ogoni will be credited for pulling the veil off the monstrous tie between oil and power in Nigeria.

The third part of *The Oil Lamp* is entitled "Ogoni," rendered in twelve segments (XXIX to XL). Major Kitemo is the agent of repression in this part. Major Kitemo is a thin veil for Major Paul Okuntimo, leader of the defunct Shell-sponsored Rivers State Internal Security Taskforce, responsible for afflicting the people of Ogoni. He is described as the "boss of the mob" (1) who is commissioned to "stem the tide / of defiance which... / had shut down Shell's oil wells" (15-17). Major Kitemo unwittingly affirms his mission as he takes the narration from XXX to XXIX. He undercuts himself as he boastfully outlines his brutal acts in Ogoni. His strategies of terror include: to create cracks in Ogoni solidarity (130), to mastermind violence along Ogoni borders so as to cause conflicts between Ogoni and its neighbours (131), wasting operations targeted at Ogoni chieftains (134), group infiltration and mass displacement of persons (135), to name only a few of the "two hundred and twenty-one ways to kill" (140) which he claims to know. Major Kitemo turns Ogoni into a killing field at the behest of Shell and the Nigerian government: "I drove them all into the bush, sent them rowing / into the creeks with fireflies as their light. Then we dug / in to hold the town, shooting to keep them in the bush" (118- 220). The actions of Major Kitemo and his men are mindless: "Shooting and bombing to keep them in the bush / we were running out of ammo by the tenth day / but Shell shipped in caseloads of what we lacked" (221- 23). In the end, Major Kitemo achieves the ultimate aim of his repression: the death of Saro-Wiwa, as shown in the first stanza of "The Pipes War." The speaker says in section XLI: "They hanged nine / for murders pre-planned;" and "Kitemo / had, at last, his last word" (1-4). This is the final act of the grand design in Ogoni, to ensure "money-on-the-barrel to the oil cartel" (13), and to ensure cashflow for further "containment strategies / when the natives get restive" (14-15). Note the word "natives." It has the echoes of history i.e imperialism and colonialism have taken local colour but they still have the character of the old.

The character runs through all the poems in *The Oil Lamp*. There is a new wave of imperialism which leaves the people with few alternatives. The people of Jese scramble to scoop petroleum products and they become victims en masse; the youths of Oleh and Olomoro fight over rusted pipes dug up by Shell, and they give opportunity to the government to employ force ("The Pipes War", 65-80); Ogoni raises a voice of resistance and is decimated; and Odi is destroyed on the pretext of law enforcement. These affected communities are parts of what Ifowodo calls the "Cesspit of the Niger Delta," a place in dire strait, without basic amenities, etc.

Conclusion

In representing this “cesspit” situation, Ifowodo, Bassey and Ikiriko have depicted images that fall into two categories. The images in the poems evince the patterns of repression and resistance. The poems embody both perspectives: repression and resistance stand head to head. Abusive power provokes mass agitation. This accentuates a continuum of conflicts through time.

There is a consistent interface in the historicity of the issues that are depicted in the poems. The images show that dispossession, under-development and environmental degradation are strategies of repression. It is obvious that repression begets resistance, and violence is always a factor. Given that oppression is a violent phenomenon, and even the most peaceful approaches of resistance get fouled in some ways, is the piety of non-violence not somewhat naïve? These are some of the many issues raised by the equation of power in the works of Ifowodo, Bassey and Ikiriko. Their poetry shows that oil-conflict has a long history of tremors. It is a saga which appears to stand a long way from a denouement.

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