**THE EXISTENTIAL CONDITION OF THE IJAWS IN THE EMERGING SOCIO-ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL MILIEU OF NIGERIA.**

**By**

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**Nigeria is a hybrid nation of over two hundred and fifty ethnic nationalities. The Ijaws as a people among the multitude of peoples that have come to constitute the geographic expression and sovereign entity known as Nigeria, find themselves enmeshed in the fluctuating socio-economic milieu of Nigeria. They as well as other ethnic nationalities that constitute Nigeria, found themselves bound to the contingencies and exigencies of the nation-state called Nigeria not by act of will or treaty but by the Lugardian fiat which in itself was a full expression of the British imperialist will to power. By fiat and history, a country was made; the country is Nigeria, its people simply are; a fact of history. Their mode of being however, is a confluence of contraction and progress. So many models of nationhood explicates Nigeria. But Nigeria, is undeniably a “torn” nation. In the words of Samuel Huntington, a nation of conflicting civilizations: the Islamic civilization and the Judeo-Christian civilization. The Ijaws, an oil rich minority tribe found themselves entwined and involved in the destiny of this phenomenal nation called Nigeria. Has such an entwinement been a curse or blessing? Have the Ijaws significant power in the organogram of the Nigerian nationhood? Are they tossed about by the tide and flow of events or are they active movers in the making of the Nigerian history? This paper critically looks at these existential realities and elucidates the existential condition of the Ijaws in the contemporary Nigeria.**

**Introduction**

The period was 1884-1885 and the venue was Berlin. The event was the conference convened by Otto Von Bismarck to discuss the partitioning of Africa. One would have expected the delegates to consist mainly of African leaders of diverse backgrounds, and representatives of the ethnic nationalities that people the African continent. No, not an African was present at the conference; not a soul! It was a gathering of European imperialists that had swooped on Africa like a brood of vultures to divest its vast natural resources. They literally dismembered the continent and apportioned it to themselves. The scramble for territories on the African continent had caused conflicts among European imperial powers.

Otto Von Bismarck, the then German Chancellor called a conference to sort things out with fellow imperialists. In that infamous conference, different peoples on the African continent were grouped into territories and handed over to various European powers. There was no regard for heterogeneity or homogeneity of cultures. Africa simply was a thing; a complete reification. Europe, the subject simply acted on Africa, the object. Imperialist Europe cast its will to possession over Africa in the fullest expression of the Nietzschean will to power.

Nigeria was one of the territories appropriated by the British as a booty from the infamous scramble. It was then a group of differently administered territories which later coalesced into the Protectorate of Northern Nigeria and the Protectorate of Southern Nigeria. While the North was predominantly Islamic and Arabic in cultural orientation, the South was predominantly Judeo-Christian in cultural orientation. For ease of administration and economic efficiency, Lord Lugard, the British colonial representative in the area woke up on a morning of 1914, without consultation nor plebiscite, declared the Protectorates of Northern and Southern Nigeria one country named Nigeria. It was under these nebulous circumstances that Nigeria was born.

The Ijaws are one of the nationalities conscripted into Nigeria by the Lugardian fiat. Like other nationalities fated into Nigeria by the British, they have continued to live the Nigerian experience, and are situated within the Nigerian peculiar existential condition. It is not a question of choice but of being. It is sheer facticity of existence. The Ijaws simply are in Nigeria; an inexorable fact of history and existence. How they exist, how they ought to be, the arbitrariness or otherwise of their existence, simply are questions to be determined by existentialism. The Ijaws simply are. They are situated in Nigeria; a fact of their existence. But who are the Ijaws?

**The Ijaw People**

The term ‘Ijaw’ is an anglicised version of Ijo or Izon which refers to the collection of tribes that inhabit the Niger Delta. They were also known as the Kumonis. They are found in Delta, Bayelsa, Rivers, Akwa Ibom and Ondo States. There is a strong myth indicating that Orus, who are said to be the progenitors of the Ijaw nation dropped from the sky1. That is another way of saying that the Orus were always there, they could not be traced to any other people beyond their era. In other words, the Ijaws are an autochthonous people.

Supporting the autochthonous origin of the Ijaws, E.J. Alagoa had this to say,

The Ijaw/Ijo/Izon ethnic communities have lived in the Niger Delta, the third largest body of wetlands in the world, for over seven, possibly, ten thousand years. They remember no other homeland. They have completely identified with the environment and developed a culture fully attuned to it.2

Strictly speaking, the Ijaws are not a homogenous people as such. As a matter of fact their consciousness as the Ijaw people could be dated to the 19th century. They are a collection of tribes bound by kinship, similarity of culture and common geography. The Ijaws consist of about fifty loosely affiliated ethnic groups who number about 3.4 million.3 They dwell largely in the creeks of the Niger Delta.

**Ijaws in Precolonial Nigeria**

Precolonial Ijaws were known for the pivotal role they played as middlemen during the transatlantic slave trade. Their strategic location on the estuaries of the Niger and the Atlantic coastline made Ijaw communities the gateways to the hinterlands of much of Nigeria. Early British imperialists and explorers relied heavily on the waterways of the River Niger for the penetration of Nigerian hinterland. Precolonial Ijaw communities related to the outside world as well as the rest of Nigeria as sovereign states. Unlike the western and northern parts of Nigeria, there was no internal colonialism among the Ijaws before the coming of the British. There were no central authorities nor was there ever a period a maximum ruler held sway over the whole of the Ijaw nation. Theirs were highly decentralised and egalitarian states. Precolonial Ijaws existed in full manifestation of their being. They neither considered themselves inferior to any community nor a minority relation to any other people in the world. They had full control of their lives and their resources. Their existence was self-defined; not in relation to any other entity beyond themselves.

The first Europeans to have contact with the Ijaws were the Portuguese. As early as the 15TH century, Portuguese explorers were already dealing with the Ijaw states. The strategic location of the Ijaw Nation on the creeks and the coastline made them strategic middlemen during the lucrative but inglorious transatlantic slave trade. The abolition of the slave trade in Britain in 1807 resulted in a boom in the oil palm trade in which the Ijaws still maintained pre-eminence as middlemen. British officials entered into treaties with Ijaw communities thus making them British protectorates. These communities that entered into British protection by a series of treaties, the British called the Oil Rivers Protectorate. That singular act was the first significant alteration in the existential condition of the Ijaws. It marked the departure of the initiative from Ijaw control to the British control. In 1893, the Oil Rivers Protectorate was expanded and renamed Niger Coast Protectorate with the headquarters at Calabar. By this singular act, the Ijaws lost the homogeneity of their identity as a people in a homogenous state. Their lives and nationhood became fused with those of other nations. It was the watershed of the Ijaw existential suppression. The Ijaw nation became a territory under Calabar. That was not what the Ijaws bargained for in their treaties with the British. That was the beginning of the Ijaw colonialism. The Niger Coast Protectorate would later become Lagos Colony and the Protectorate of Southern Nigeria, which was further merged with the Protectorate of Northern Nigeria to become Nigeria. The Ijaws lost control of their existential control with each expansion or merger. Their identity got subsumed under a larger identity; their existential destiny got further altered.

The crucial point here is that the Ijaws did not enter into dealings with the British as Nigerians, rather, they entered Nigeria as independent principalities who were already dealing with the British as sovereign states. They entered into no treaties with Nigeria. Their treaties were with the British, and the British alone; never Nigeria. These treaties were to become popular reference points in the agitation for an independent Ijaw State by the defunct Niger Delta Volunteer Force led by Alhaji Asari Dokubo. Asari argued that Ijaw states entered into treaties with the British to become British protectorates but not Nigeria. He argued that there was no single extant document whatsoever where Ijaws consented to becoming Nigerians as their treaties with the British did not join them into nationhood or relationship with other parts of Nigeria. Rather, the treaties established direct relationship between the British and the Ijaw nation.

**The Reality of Amalgamation and Post-Independence Nigeria**

The amalgamation of British colony and protectorates in northern and southern Nigeria marked the birth of Nigeria as we know it today. It was the leveller of peoples who had existed somewhat independently into one, hybrid nation with a new destiny and new order. The lives and the modus vivendi of the component nationalities that became the new nation, Nigeria, were drastically altered. The experience of Nigeria created new harsh realities for the Ijaw nation. A hitherto self-sufficient people saw themselves as minorities almost on the fringe of affairs in their new country. Nigeria is dominated by the big three: the Hausa/Fulani in the North, the Yoruba in the West and the Igbo in the East. There are minority tribes in the north, west and east but they were overshadowed by the majority tribes. Nigeria as a country however is dominated by the north.

It is pertinent to note that Frederick Lugard came to Nigeria, not as a British representative but as a company employee. He first worked for the Royal East Indies Company, then for the Royal African Company and finally, the Royal Niger Company which had the charter to administer the territories known as Nigeria for the British. Lugard’s preoccupations therefore were decisively economic. The amalgamation was done without any regard to the cultural and socio-political sensibilities of the amalgamated people. He merely needed an economically viable and administratively convenient state. The North was not economically viable. There was dearth of administrative manpower. He did the economically convenient – amalgamation. In the words of Richard Akinjide, a former attorney-general of the Federation and First Republic minister of education, ‘what was amalgamated were the administrations of northern and southern Nigeria but not the people as the North remained insulated to the rest of Nigeria until 1960’.4

Post-independence Nigeria subsumed the Ijaw nation under the Eastern Region. The country itself was modelled on the United Kingdom template. The North was created to simulate England. Sufficient electoral constituencies were awarded to it to ensure that just as England does in the UK, the North will continues to dominate the country. The West and the East were modelled after Wales and Scotland respectively. Just as in the UK, even though a Welshman or a Scot might be allowed to be prime minister from time to time, real power remained with England. So also the British planned for Nigeria: though an Easterner or a Westerner might be allowed to lead the country from time to time, the British intended real power to remain with the North always. Therein lies the philosophy of ‘born to rule’ of a segment of the northern elite. Apparently, the British neither anticipated an Ijaw uprising nor an Ijaw presidency. Post-independence Nigeria so to speak, nationalized all the nations that made up Nigeria. The post-independence political arrangement in Nigeria did not envisage much political power for the Ijaw nation.

**Oil and the Question of Ownership**

Crude oil, sometimes called liquid gold or black gold, in recorded history was first discovered in Shush in Southern Iran. That was in c.500 BC. The Chinese were also known to have drilled crude oil in the third century BC. In 1556, Agricola, the German mineralogist who discovered the recovery and refining of crude oil called it ‘petroleum’. ‘Petroleum’ comes from the Latin words ‘petra’ which means rock and ‘oleum’ which means oil. Needless to say, crude oil has been in use for thousands of years before it was discovered in Nigeria. In modern history however, oil was first discovered in commercial quantity in USA when Col. Edwin Drake sunk a well near some natural oil seepages in Pennsylvania in 1859.

Today, crude oil constitute about 53% of the world’s energy source. The importance of crude oil to global economy and its political significance, therefore cannot be gainsaid.

The exploration of oil in Nigeria dates back to 1906 when Simon Bergheim obtained license from the colonial government of Southern Nigeria to explore oil in Southern Nigeria. Bergheim established the Nigerian Bitumen Corporation and hoped to strike oil based on his knowledge of the geology of Southern Nigeria. He wasn’t that lucky; he concentrated his exploratory activities around Okitupupa. He was followed in 1937 by Shell D’Arcy, an Anglo-Dutch consortium which tried out some wells around Owerri between 1951 and 1953 with marginal success. It was not until 1956 that success smiled on them as they struck the liquid gold in the Ijaw community of Oloibiri in present day Bayelsa State. Since then the story of Niger Delta has not remained the same. Some vocabularies such as, ‘environmental degradation’, ‘oil spillage’ and ‘resource control’ entered the vocabulary of their everyday parlance. Whether the discovery was a curse or blessing to the Ijaw nation is yet to be determined by history. What is certain is that that singular discovery changed the mode of being of the Ijaw community. They became an oil producing community, a new existential reality with concomitant existential challenges.

Who owns the oil?

This is the question at the heart of the Ijaw existential condition. There is no gainsaying that the exploitation of oil has been a veritable source of foreign exchange and revenue to Nigeria. Oil is a powerful factor in international politics. Needless to say, the discovery of oil in Ijaw land made Nigeria attractive. Crude oil put Nigeria in a strategic place of importance in global economics. But who owns the oil? What is the philosophy of ownership? What are the axioms and grundnorms that inform such philosophy? What are the rights of participation in Nigerian oil resources?

The rights of participation in Nigeria’s mineral resources is mired in controversies. Section 44(3) of the 1999 Constitution gives the right to ownership of mineral resources anywhere in Nigeria to the Federal government, effectively making Ijaws strangers to the vast mineral resources buried by nature in the bowels of the ground in their homeland save the 13% derivation grudgingly given back to them by the federal government.

The situation is not of recent origin, the Federal government has always claimed exclusive and absolute ownership of the petroleum resources of the Niger Delta always disguised in the books as ‘mineral’ resources in a false air of universality. The sober truth has always been that crude oil constitutes about 90% of Nigeria’s foreign export and over 70% of Nigeria’s total revenue

What is the philosophy of right behind the federal government’s right to ownership of oil in Ijawland? “Right means that which is proper under the law. It is something due to a person by just claim, legal guarantee or moral principle. It also means power, privilege or immunity secured to a person by law”.5 If right is that which is proper under the law, the question now will be the nature of the law that gives the federal government such right of ownership. If right is something due to a person by just claim, would it be unjust for the Ijaws to claim right of ownership to that which is beneath their land? In 1952, the General Assembly of the United Nations made a resolution to the effect that the right of a people to freely use and exploit their natural wealth and resources is inherent in their sovereignty.6 Have not the Ijaws such inherent right? Who is the sovereign in Nigeria? If the people are the sovereign in Nigeria, are the Ijaws not part of these people?

**Ijaw Existential Condition**

The Ijaws have found themselves thrown upon a unique way of being in the world by the experience of Nigeria. Their mode of being in the world is intricately connected to the politics of oil exploration in the Niger Delta. Ijaw existential situation in Nigeria, can be viewed in two existential ways: “being in itself” and “being for itself”. These are two existential categories propounded by Jean-Paul Sartre.7 A ‘being in itself’ in Sartre’s existential philosophy is a mode of being in which the essence and purpose of the being is determined by another being. In other words, it is a being in an objectified relation to another being. Simply put, it is a being existing for another being. A being for itself however, is a being that exists as a subject and is an end unto itself. It is in existence for the realisation of itself. There is no end beyond it neither can its existence be subjected to an end other than its own realisation.

Which mode of being are the Ijaws in relation to the federal government, being in itself or being for itself? Since the discovery of oil in Ijawland, the Ijaws have been thoroughly subjected to the ends and purposes of the federal government. The federal government took absolute control of the oil resources beneath the Ijaw land. It carries out oil exploitation with utter disregard to the environment, grants oil prospecting licenses without any input from the Ijaw community and deploys the bulk of the revenue generated from the oil mostly to areas outside of Ijaw land. The existential condition of the Ijaws in relation to the federal government therefore, is in the mode of ‘being in itself’. It is inauthentic existence as it is a mode of being that brutishly subjects the Ijaw nation to the ends of the federal government. The ideal relation is a mode of being in the category of ‘being for itself’. It would have empowered the Ijaws to effectively utilise and integrate the resources in their environment for self-realisation. The difference between the mode of ‘being in itself’ and ‘being for itself’ is the cause of the perennial conflict in the Niger delta. The entire Ijaw struggle can be existentially explained as striving from ‘being in itself’ to ‘being for itself’.

What is the worth and dignity of the Ijaw people? Are they a people just inhabiting their environment or are they an integral part of that environment?

The Ijaw environment cannot be separated from the identity of the Ijaw nation. The Ijaw land, the mineral resources beneath it and the people sitting on top of it constitute the meaning of Ijaw. Their existence cannot be defined in isolation to any of these factors. Man does not just exist in the world as if he were a factor different from and extraneous to the world. He is not contained in the world the way water is contained in a cup. He exists with the world. His identity is inseparable from the world and the world is inseparable from him. Same applies to the Ijaw nation. The identity of the Ijaw is inseparable to the land they inhabit and all beneath it. The Ijaws are not extraneous to their land and its resources. There cannot be an Ijaw nation without an Ijaw land. Conversely, there cannot be an Ijaw land without an Ijaw nation. It is the Ijaw land that makes the people Ijaw people. It is the Ijaw people that call the Ijaw land to conscious existence. Therefore, it is the Ijaw nation that makes the Ijaw land part of the world. There cannot be Ijaw mineral resources outside of Ijaw land. If Ijaw land belongs to Ijaw people, it follows that the mineral resources of the Ijaw land necessarily belongs to the Ijaw nation. The idea therefore, that the mineral resources beneath the land of a people is a total stranger to reason.

The concept of 'Dasein’ in Heidegger’s existentialist philosophy gives backing to the thesis above. According to Heidegger, man is a phenomenon that reveals itself. This manifestation of man does not happen in a vacuum. It happens in an environment. The environment therefore, is an essential of the humanity of man. Hence, Heidegger called humanity ‘Dasein’ which means ‘being there’8. In other words, every human person, every community exists inseparably with his environment. Heidegger considers the world to be a characteristic of Dasein (humanity). If the immediate environment of a people is a necessary characteristic of their identity as such a people, then the idea of separating them from the resources of that very environment is a misnomer.

This situation the Ijaws have fought from the time of Isaac Adaka Boro to Muhajid Asari Dokubo. Perfectly or imperfectly, it has been a struggle to integrate the Ijaw man fully with the resources in the Ijaw environment. It is a struggle that has recorded measured setbacks and measured successes. It is a struggle has raised the stake of the Ijaws in the natural resources beneath their land from 0% to 1% up to the present day 13% percent. It is a struggle that has raised the Ijaw man from expendable minority to leadership in the political organogram of Nigeria. It is a struggle that has defined Ijaw consciousness in present day Nigeria.

**Conclusion**

Existence is an arbitrary activity of nature. But the mode of being is our responsibility and changes in it are our choices to make. The Ijaw nation has been arbitrarily incorporated into Nigeria. The choice and responsibility for change in the fortunes of the Ijaw nation in the reality of Nigeria lies squarely on the shoulders of the Ijaw people. Despite being a minority tribe, from the day Isaac Boro took some men into the jungle in revolt against the Federal Government till date, the Ijaws have continued to work assiduously for improvement in their mode of being in Nigeria using different and even sometimes scary methodologies. They have manoeuvred themselves to a place of decisive reckoning in Nigeria’s improbable political equation.

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