

## **The Niger Delta in Nigerian Nation-Building, 1960-2005**

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### **Keywords**

Civil-war, governance, legislating, science, states-creation, technology.

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### **Abstract**

This work highlights the various methods employed by the Niger Delta peoples in nation-building. In the First Republic they propounded the twelve states structure of the Nigerian Federation. Then in the civil war period, between 1967 and 1970, they were the cornerstone of the victory of the Federal Troops as well as saving lives in the defunct Republic of Biafra. Their activities in the post-war years were towards the rehabilitation and reconstruction programme of the Federal Government of Nigeria. This gave them the opportunity to establish many things including the Rivers State Secretariat, gas turbine, Sea School, the pioneer University of Science and

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Technology in Nigeria and free education. These contributions are indelible and yearn for historical documentation.

### **Introduction**

Okilo (1992:1) defines nation-building as the process of developing a country in a way that would satisfy the needs and aspirations of the nationals. The good activities in this regard usually bring great changes not only in something new but also what can move the country forward. According to Carr (1952), without nation-building inculcating a new order, a set of values in the economic, political and social life of the inhabitants of a country, the sovereignty of that nation would not be realized. Hence, every nation that wants to maintain its sovereignty needs active nation-builders. And so is Nigeria whose nation-builders from the Niger Delta joined others from other parts of the country to contribute towards the existence of this largest black nation in the world.

The Niger Delta people were in the art of nation-building for over forty years, 1960-2005. Their motivation stemmed from their forebears that occupy nine-tenth of the Nigerian coastline. Because they were exposed to international commerce with Europeans, they contributed to the political foundation of Nigeria from 1830 to 1960. This includes their active participation in the independence movement during the colonial period, 1900-1960. As soon as independence was achieved in 1960, they and others were in the task of nation-building which only few aspects of their contributions are documented in this work.

### **The First Republic and the Twelve States Structure of Nigeria, 1960-1967**

The post-colonial period started in 1960 and witnessed the Niger Delta revolutionaries in nation-building. They were not contented with the refusal of the Imperial Government to create more States in colonial Nigeria. After Eyo Ita's campaign for ethnical states during the Macpherson Constitutional Conference before 1951 and that of Biriye in the 1957 London Conference, they saw the independence period of the First Republic of Nigeria, 1960-1967, as an opportunity to continue their agitation for it. Hence, an Ijo NCNC member of the Federal House of Representatives for Opobo-South, Chief U. O. Ekeneokot of Obolo (Andoni), raised a motion for the creation of more states in the Nigerian Federation with emphasis on a future Rivers State. Although it was carefully noted, it did not receive the immediate approval of the NCNC-NPC coalition government (Amini-Philips, 2005: 147-150).

In 1966, the Rivers Leaders of Thought delegated Dr. Isaac John Fiberesima (1906-1986) of Okrika whose position as the pioneer medical doctor in Okrika advanced the study of medicine in the Niger Delta, Chiefs Harold Dappa-Biriye, Wenike Briggs and Dr. W. T. Wakama to the Eastern Nigerian Consultative Assembly at Enugu. The research of Daminabo (2006) showed that the issue discussed also bordered on the creation of Rivers State. They furthered their demand into the military regime in 1967 when Chiefs Harold Dappa-Biriye of Bonny and Zumoh Efeke of Amassoma launched a campaign in Northern Nigeria for the division of the country into twelve states structure. Opara (1997:36-37) documented the support of

the Northern Nigerian politicians. The suggested formula of these Niger Delta men, six states each in the North and South, was the policy adopted by the Federal Military Government headed by General Yakubu Gowon in creating the twelve states structure of the Nigeria Federation in May 1967.

Saro-Wiwa (1989: 257-266) stated that the memorandum which created the enabling environment for the Nigerian Government to create more states in 1967 was prepared on 10 September 1966 and signed by the Niger Delta Ijo and their neighbours. In the Niger Delta delegation to the Federal Government for this feat were Chief Harold J. R. Dappa-Biriye, Messrs. Emmanuel J. A. Oriji and Wenike Oporum Briggs. The signatories for the creation of Rivers State were S. N. Dikibo (Chairman), Dr. Isaac J. M. Fiberesima (Degema Division), Barrister Nwobidike Nwanodi (Ahoada and Port Harcourt Divisions), Barrister Robert P. G. Okara (Brass Division) and Mr. Graham B. C. Otoko of Obolo (Andoni) signed for (Opobo Division).

It became one of the major causes of the Nigerian civil war when some groups in the eastern part of Nigeria disagreed with this novel structure of the federation. The bone of contention was the creation of Rivers State which goes with Port Harcourt, the petroleum city of Nigeria, as the state capital. In order to redeem it the architects of the defunct Republic of Biafra saw civil war as imminent. This enlisted the reaction of some Niger Delta revolutionaries whom proved their mettle in the battle field.

### **The Nigerian Civil War and the Niger Delta Contributions, 1967-1970**

During the Nigerian civil war the contributions of Harold Jenebiwari Rowland Dappa-Biriye (1920-2005) formerly Wilcox of Bonny had remained prominent. Etekpe (2004) demonstrated Biriye as a brain behind the victory of the Federal troops in the civil war. He toured abroad and won the British and Russian support for Nigeria. To this end, an Ijo man, General George Kurubo of Bonny, was appointed Nigeria's ambassador to the USSR to deepen the Russian commitment to Nigeria. In the same year, 1967, Dappa-Biriye was appointed a member of Nigeria's delegation to the United Nations General Assembly. This enabled the U.N. to mediate in the Arab-Israeli conflict through the passing of Resolution 242 of the United Nations Organisation. In addition, his Chairmanship of the National Council for Arts and Culture in Nigeria, 1975-1978, would be remembered for two things. First is the World Festival of Arts and Culture for Blacks (FESTAC) that took place in Nigeria in 1977. Second, he used the opportunity of the post-colonial Nigeria to cement the unity of the Negro world.

Within this independence period, the Ijo also produced the pioneer revolutionaries that advanced the political development of Nigeria. Their feats were eloquent during the years. Prominent amongst them were Isaac Adaka Boro, Samuel Owonaru, Nottingham Dick, George Amangala, Boardman Nyananyo, Sylvanus J. S. Cookey and Geoffrey L. Uzono. They symbolized Ijo struggle for self-determination on the one hand and Ijo supreme sacrifice and commitment for

the unity of Nigeria. Indeed their collective and individual activities are vital in history. It is a common knowledge that their salvaging roles in the liberation of the Niger Delta region during the civil war brought the Federal troops to victory.

Isaac Jasper Adaka Boro (1938-1968) was the icon of the struggle. Prior to his revolutionary martyrdom, he had identified the problems of his Ijo ethnicity and that of Nigeria. Boro was the first Nigerian to undertake an armed struggle against the Nigerian State. It was to illuminate and demonstrate to the world the exploitation and oppression of the Ijo. In the course of it, he and some of his Niger Delta Volunteer Force of 159 men were arrested, charged for treason, sentenced to death and later commuted to life imprisonment (Tebekaemi, 1982). The threats of Ojukwu's rebellion to undermine the indivisibility of Nigeria forced Gowon's administration of Nigeria to pardon and enlist them into the Nigerian Armed Forces. Hence, they justified the Federal confidence in the Ijo and reinstated the unity of Nigeria. Although Boro died in the struggle of defending the Nigerian Federation, he was not alone. He enjoyed the tremendous support of his contemporaries like Nyananyo.

According to Nyananyo (2006: 1-2), Boardman Nyananyo (1932-1967) was named Esinkuma, meaning, "fear not". From his early education at Mamfe in Cameroon and at the Kalabari National College Buguma, he displayed much brilliance in mathematics that his peers nicknamed him "Boardman". After his Senior Cambridge Examinations that he passed in flying colours, Esinkuma was offered scholarship by St. Andrews University Scotland to study mathematics. He

distinguished himself and completed his programme in record time with Master of Arts degree in Mathematics and Diploma in Education. This distinctive achievement endeared St. Andrews to offer him a job that he did for three years. Boardman returned to contribute to the development of Nigeria, in 1963. He taught Mathematics at Priscilla Memorial Secondary School (PMSS) Oguta and Federal Government College Warri.

It was at Warri that he and his friend, George Amangala left and enlisted in the Nigerian Army. Their enlistment sensitized the Ijo youth who went through the creeks to Lagos. As a result, the famous Bonny Camp Training Centre was established in Victoria Island for the military training of volunteers from Ijo land. The aftermath is that they contributed to the success of the Federal troops with their rich knowledge of the Niger Delta terrain. The quintet, Nyananyo, Amangala, Boro, Owonaru and Dick who were commissioned officers in the Third Marine Commando had a fulfilled mission of landing in Bonny in July 1967 and liberate all Ijo land before December 1967 (Awoala 1983).

However, the contributions of Nyananyo can rarely be forgotten. This gallant Army Major used his mathematical training to estimate the enemy positions. Nyananyo (2006:2-4) revealed that whenever the secessionists shell, he will ascertain the position from whence the shell came and encourage the Federal troops to set their equipment to the required distance. By this method of Nyananyo, the enemy was always wiped out. Unfortunately and except Owonaru, he and his above named friends were killed during “mopping

up” operations in Bonny in December 1967 and late 1968. In 1982, the Shehu Shagari administration of Nigeria awarded Nyananyo the posthumous national award of the Member of the Order of the Niger (MON). This was in recognition of his gallant soldiering, brilliance and contributions to the victory of the Federal troops in the Nigerian Civil War, 1967-1970.

Coming to the role of Cookey during the war period, Anokari (1984: 37-38) posits that he was the Provincial Administrator of Opobo Province and Commissioner for Special Duties in the defunct Republic of Biafra. His primary responsibility was to negotiate for assistance from the foreign relief agencies. As a result, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the World Council of Churches (WCC) and Caritas International were sending relief supplies to Biafra. It is also to the credit of Cookey that he undertook negotiations with Presidents Houphouet-Bigny of Ivory Coast, Albert Bongo of Gabon and Siaka Stevens of Sierra Leone, among others to recognize and support this defunct republic. Their assistance ranges from medical facilities and drugs to the evacuation of the sick children from the war affected areas to these countries for treatment. Some were sent to Sao Tome. After receiving medical attention, they were sent to school there until the end of hostilities when it was imminent for them to return to Nigeria and witness

Two gentlemen were working closely with Cookey in the Opobo provincial office. They were the Provincial Secretary, Mr. Chukujiekwu from the present day Enugu State, and the Intelligent Officer, Mr. Geoffrey Lysias Uzono of Obolo (Andoni) in the Niger Delta. Before Opobo fell to the



Federal Troops in 1968, these two gentlemen protected the interest of the Andoni and Ibani Ijo groups against molestations by the secessionist forces for supporting the federal cause. According to Uzono (1987:1-2), in addition they championed a massive educational advancement campaigns that finally put these groups in the front burner of their regional politics and gave them a voice in the post-war Nigerian nation-building. Both Uzono and Chukujekwu were motivated on the fact that a nation, community and family are recognized by its qualitative elements in nation-building and not by its number of human beings.

### **The Niger Delta in the Post-War Nation-Building, 1970-2005**

In the post-war years, 1970-2005, Nigeria was not without the nation building of the Niger Delta revolutionaries since many of them were governors, legislators and paramount rulers. At this period were Alfred Papapreye Diette-Spiff who was a naval officer, later Military Governor of Rivers State in the post-war years and monarch of Twon-Brass and Chief Melford Obiene Okilo. Others were Chief Ada George, His Royal Majesty King Owen Sylvanus Ukafia-Ede VI and Chief Richard Aiyetowonwo Jolowo. While there were many of them, this paper could only take this number because of the economy of pagination. Some of them started their roles during the Nigerian civil war.

First among these equals is King Alfred Papapreye Diette-Spiff (1942- ) who played several roles as a statesman, distinguished seaman, ex-naval commander and currently the

paramount ruler of Twon (Brass) in Bayelsa State. According to Ayotamuno (2006:12), Spiff initiated the training of divers as a specialized unit to meet the critical operational needs of the Nigerian Navy which he was a naval officer. A good number of top naval officers benefited from this legacy and grew to command ships while some became Chief of Staff Nigerian Navy at various times. In later years when Spiff became the first Military Governor of Rivers State, 1967-1975, he replicated this fact by establishing the Nigerian Sea School, Isaka, for the training of seamen. He also set up the Rivers State Diving School under the then Ministry of Works and Transport.

Motivated by his flare for special boat operations in patrols and intelligence, Spiff was instrumental for the creation of an Amphibious Brigade in the Nigerian Army. He seconded some men to train as amphibious personnel. This feat endeared the Army High Command to see the need for an amphibious operation and establish it without delay. Being the first Military Governor, Commander A. P. Diette-Spiff carried out two feats that moved Rivers State forward. He implemented the Federal Government's policy of resettlement, rehabilitation and reconstruction in the Rivers State. Second, the Rivers State secretariat and other infrastructures built by his administration put the State on the fast lane of development (Daminabo 2006).

Following the trend was Chief Melford Obiene Okilo, a career politician and first civilian Governor of Rivers State, 1979-1983. Oral history stated that after his birth in Amakalakala-Ogbia, and training in various institutions, he

taught briefly before winning parliamentary elections in 1959 into the Federal House of Representatives under the ticket of the Niger Delta Congress (NDC). This minority opposition party in the defunct Eastern Nigeria was founded and led by Chief Harold Dappa-Biriye. It is instructive to note that the alliance between the Northern Peoples Congress (NPC) and the Niger Delta Congress (NDC) facilitated Okilo's appointment as Parliamentary Secretary to the then Prime Minister of Nigeria, Sir Tafawa Balewa. As a result, he is known to have played a leading role in the national development of Nigeria. He was committed to the unity of his country when he won the 1959 election as the only southerner in alliance with the NPC. Prior to this time, southerners and northerners were craving for the split of Nigeria but his election shows that they were in need of each other (Awoala 2003).

In the post independence Nigeria, Okilo doggedly contributed to the fight for the restoration of fiscal federalism during the Second Republic. Particularly along with Professor Ambrose Alli, Second Republican Governor of the Bendel State, they instituted a legal action against the Federal Government and restored revenue allocation formula by derivation in Nigeria. Chief Melford Okilo as Governor of Rivers State, 1979-1983 assuaged the feeling of neglect, deprivation, backwardness and poverty that characterized the Ijo peoples and pioneered some schemes aimed at facilitating development in the Niger Delta area. These include the establishment of the first independent electricity power plant in the southern part of the country, the Imiringi gas turbine

that is now supplying electric power to the present Bayelsa State. Others are his aggressive policy of canalization, flooding and erosion control complemented with the establishment of an Institute of Flood and Erosion Control and the establishment of the first Nigerian University of Science and Technology as a foundation towards technological advancement of the country (Daminabo 2006).

In the Third Republic of Nigeria, the contributions of Chief Rufus Ada George were imminent. According to Ayotamuno in a personal communication, Chief Ada George of Okrika (1940- ), a professional accountant, became Secretary to the Government of Rivers State in the Second Republic. By 1991, he was elected Executive Governor of Rivers State in the Third Republic that was suddenly terminated in 1993. His twenty months administration sponsored the Rivers Chiefs and Peoples Conference (RCPC) to the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1993. The outcome of it led to the establishment of the Rivers State Environmental Protection Agency (RSEPA) that provided the framework and personnel for the subsequent creation of the Ministry of Environment in Rivers State. He identified and opened up new roads as a veritable strategy for expanding Port Harcourt to meet the population influx.

Of importance to the Ijo in the new millennium are the struggles of His Royal Majesty King Owen Sylvanus Ukafia-Ede VI (1933- ) of Obolo (Andoni) towards the political development of Nigeria. Ukafia-Ede VI, Paramount Ruler of Eastern Obolo Local Government Area, Akwa Ibom State, was trained at the Nigerian Institute of Journalism, Lagos. Jeffreys

(2006) aptly stated that after distinguishing himself in investigative journalism, advanced reporting, press law, he served many media houses between 1952 and 1980 before he retired as a news editor. Ukafia-Ede was reputed in practical journalism and accurate reporting. He used his position in the *Nigerian Chronicle*, Calabar, to mould some young journalists into geniuses. Amongst them were Ray Ekpu, now proprietor of *Newswatch Weekly Magazine*; Nick Fadugba, editor of a London based magazine; Nnamso Umoren, Patrick and Kate Okon who ended up as permanent secretaries as well as Clement Ebri that latter became Governor of Cross River State in the Second Republic.

Ukafia's role in the Nigerian Civil War between 1967 and 1970 was immense. As a tall gentleman with strong disposition, respectability and integrity, he steered Eastern Obolo affairs during this period and was a force in the eastern fringe of the Niger Delta. His journalism contributed to the victory of the Federal Troops. He also went on an enlightenment campaign of the neighbouring villages where the Eastern Obolo refugees had sojourned and persuaded them to return to their homes. Then, Eastern Obolo (Andoni) was deserted owing to the death of 105 indigenes during the liberation of the area by the Federal Troops on Sunday 31 March 1968. Ukafia-Ede also reactivated the daily market, educational institutions with free education and the Eastern Obolo Clan Council of Chiefs. He had so much influence and respect that put Eastern Obolo in the front burner of the Niger Delta. Eastern Obolo owes its existence to this singular effort (Abia 2003:3).

As soon as he retired from active journalism in 1980, he ascended the most ancient Eastern Obolo throne with innovations. As such, King Ukafia-Ede VI is the first Andoni monarch to work-up his throne from third class to first class institution. He was recognized by the Government of Cross River State as the Village Head of Okoroete Town in 1981 and Clan Head of Eastern Obolo (Andoni) in 1987. In 1987, Akwa Ibom State was created with Eastern Obolo (Andoni) as a part. He used the opportunity to crave for the creation of Eastern Obolo Local Government Council that materialized in 1996 before he was elevated to Paramount Ruler of Eastern Obolo Local Government Area by the Military Administrator of Akwa Ibom State, Group Captain John Ebiye in 1999 (Ukafia 2004).

This pioneer first class monarch in Obolo (Andoni) was the Chairman of the Akwa Ibom State Council of Chiefs and Traditional Rulers between 2003 and 2004. While in this position, Ukafia-Ede's innovations were the one thousand naira (N1, 000.00) Nigerian currency note issued in 2005 in honour of late Dr. Clement Isong, a former Governor of the Central Bank. This came up in his welcome address to President Olusegun Obasanjo of Nigeria during the latter's visit to Akwa Ibom State in August 2004. Second, he used the same welcome address to prevent Obasanjo's administration from transferring some oil wells in the Niger Delta to neighbouring States. With these in view, the dynamism of King Ukafia-Ede VI from journalist to traditional ruler contributed to the development of Nigeria (Ukafia 2004).

Another Nigerian patriot from Ijo extraction is Chief Richard Aiyetowonwo Jolowo (1960-2004) of Ajakpa in Arogbo, Ese-Odo Local Government Area of Ondo State. He read Law at the University of Lagos and graduated with L.L.M. in 1973. Personal communications with Dr. Z. B. Agbede revealed that within his period in the university, he represented Nigerian students in the Conference of National Affairs in Texas, USA in 1969. After graduation, Jolowo became a Member of the Ondo State House of Assembly in 1979 and rose to the position of Speaker from 1981 to 1983.

According to Agbede (2004), Chief Richard Jolowo headed the National Poverty Eradication Programme in Ondo State between 2001 and 2003 and the State Christian Pilgrims Welfare Board until his death in 2004. He built the road linking Orotu and Ajapa and the Ajapa Basic Health Centre. He also contributed enormously to the establishment of Okhubama High School, Ajapa; Community Grammar School, Biogbini; Eliki Model College, Addoseimo; Arogbo Grammar School and St. Arenitan Memorial High School. Ijaw language that is now taught in primary schools in Ondo State as well as broadcasting it in the Ondo State radio is his making. The demand and creation of Ese-Odo Local Government Council is also entirely his effort.

### **Conclusion**

Going by the forgone analysis, the Niger Delta revolutionaries were in the Nigerian nation-building between 1960 and 2005. Within this period their efforts in the realization of the creation of twelve states in the Nigerian Federation was laudable.

Thereafter, they went into other aspects of nation building alongside with other Nigerians and played a leading role that ensured the victory of the Federal Troops in the Nigerian Civil War, 1967-1970. In the post-war period, 1970-2005, they are known to have established the first university of science and technology in the country.

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### **Biographical Note**

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