

Environmental degradation and cultural erosion in Ogoniland: A case study of the oil spills in Bodo



Alicia Fentiman^{a,*}, Nenibarini Zabbey^b

^a 29 Portugal Place, Cambridge CB5 8AF, UK

^b Department of Fisheries, Faculty of Agriculture, University of Port Harcourt, PMB 5323, East-West Road, Choba, Rivers State, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the impact of two significant oil spills in the Niger Delta which occurred in 2008. It focuses specifically on the Bodo community in Ogoniland. The paper adheres to Ken Saro-Wiwa's belief that 'the environment is man's first right' and that the environment should be viewed as the foundation and basis for other rights—such as social, political and economic. The environment is thus regarded as integral to the existence of a community. This novel research sheds light on the impact of the oil spills on the economic, social and cultural institutions through a case study on Bodo. The environmental degradation is clearly visible through the creeks and network of swamps; however, what is 'less visible' and equally important is the 'cultural erosion' of indigenous institutions. It is argued that the impact of the oil spills in 2008 have been so severe that they have not only significantly altered the environmental landscape but they also have the potential to alter the ethnographic landscape of Bodo. In recognition of Ken Saro-Wiwa, it is argued that the cultural human rights of marginalized and excluded groups, such as the people of Bodo, must be preserved.

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1. Introduction

'The environment is man's first right. Without a safe environment, man cannot exist to claim other rights be they social, political or economic.' MOSOP, *Ken Saro-Wiwa's Last Words* 2004, pp. 48–49).

This paper examines the effects of the oil industry on indigenous practices and cultural human rights through an in depth case study of the significant impact of two devastating oil spills in 2008 on the Bodo community in Ogoniland. There is an extensive literature on Ken Saro-Wiwa's legacy, which examines the significant contributions he made to promote the human rights of marginalized minority groups in Nigeria, especially the Ogoni people. Through his writing and advocacy he was able to highlight the plight of the Ogoni people throughout Nigeria and to international communities about the environmental, economic and cultural degradation of the Ogoni by the oil industry through a variety of genres. In his book, *Genocide in Nigeria* (1992) he shows that the definition of environment for the Ogoni needs to be seen in broader, more holistic terms, 'To the Ogoni, rivers and streams do not only provide water for life—for bathing and drinking etc; they do not only provide fish for food, they are sacred and are bound up

intricately with the life of the community, of the entire Ogoni nation.' Saro-Wiwa (1992, p. 12). This view is also captured and illustrated metaphorically in his classic collection of Ogoni folk tales, *The Singing Anthill* (Saro-Wiwa, 1991). The folktales recounted the age-old natural capital and productivity of Ogoni land. Presenting *Kuru*, the tortoise, as both hero and buffoon, the traditional Ogoni stories highlighted bountiful harvest from the land, forest and water bodies that form the Ogoni landscape. Poignantly, it shows how *Kuru's* wit and cunning trait enabled it to survive the socio-cultural dynamics of a predominantly fishing, hunting and farming Ogoni society.

Saro-Wiwa gave a voice to a cause he passionately believed in and which tragically, took his life. He has left his legacy behind in Ogoniland, setting up the Ogoni Bill of Rights, creating the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP), advocating on behalf of marginalized minority groups in the Niger Delta, and putting pressure on the Nigerian government and oil companies to compensate the people of Ogoniland for the destruction and devastation of their environment. Saro-Wiwa also set the precedent for other minority and marginalized groups to emerge as agents for social justice and recognition: the Ijaw Youth Council, the Kaiama Declaration of the Ijaw Youth Council (IYC), and the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), (see Ukeje (2010) and Obi (2010) for an overview of the various movements).

* Corresponding author.

Over the last few decades, there has been a growing literature and interest on oil in Nigeria. Several studies have looked at the political economy of oil, the economics of oil and the relationship between foreign oil companies and the nation state whilst others wrote about the rise of a Pan-African movement associated with oil (Apter, 2009). In Behrends et al. (2013), the authors use a different lens and look at the 'curse of oil' through various perspectives with a series of illuminating case studies. For example, Watts (2008) illustrates the 'oil complex' in his article, 'the anatomy of a Petro-Insurgency in the Niger Delta'. Others focus at the grassroots level and examine the linkages between oil extraction, dispossession and the escalating violence (Obi, 2010).

The aim of this paper, however, is to look more specifically and to apply an ethnographic approach to examine the impact of two major oil spills in 2008 on the local Bodo community and its culture. It is a novel study because it captures the voices of the local people and the communities' perceptions and experiences. Through their narratives, their personal stories of how the recent spills affected them are revealed not only individually but also collectively. The research sheds light on the impact of oil on the institutions and practices that the Ogoni hold sacred.

Ken Saro-Wiwa died in 1995, and he did not live to see the continual escalation of the environmental degradation nor the devastating impact of two major oil spills in Bodo in 2008–2009 on the Ogoni and their culture. However, he did set the foundation for scholars to write, publicize and advocate for the rights of the Ogoni people. He devoted his life to a cause that he was committed. His final words, 'nor imprisonment nor death can stop our ultimate victory' are a stark reminder of his heroic and stoic nature. Twenty years on we are indebted to him for devoting his life to campaign for social justice. This paper is a small contribution to his mission, and it is dedicated to him.

2. The Bodo community

The translation of Bodo means 'on the sea' which is an extraction from *Boodor* which means 'because of the sea' (Tanen,

2005, p. 1). Bodo occupies the southern coastal extreme of Gokana Kingdom in Ogoniland, east of the Niger Delta in Nigeria. It is bounded seaward to the east by Andoni, west by Bolo, and to the southern end by Bonny and the Atlantic Ocean (Tanen, 2005; Piegbara and Kedei, 2003; Alawa, 1977).

Bodo is subdivided into 35 villages traditionally administered by a central council of chiefs with an apex monarch King. In order to capture the impact of the recent oil spills on the communities and to gather their perspectives, field research was carried out in several waterfront villages in Bodo including Tene-ol, Gbea, Tegu, Kolgba, Sugi and Kozo (see Fig. 1). Markets and several fishing ports were also visited to document the items for trade and to probe for any changes in livelihoods over the past 7 years since the oil spills. In-depth interviews, case study, participant observation, and focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted with key stakeholders including the chiefs, elders, women groups, fishing cooperatives, youth groups, faith leaders, and school pupils.

3. History of oil exploration in Ogoniland

Crude oil was first discovered in commercial quantity in Nigeria in 1956 at Oloibiri in the present day Bayelsa State (NDDC, 2001; Okonta, 2008). Two years later (1958), the second commercial oil deposit, the Bomu oil field in Ogoniland, was discovered and contributed significantly to the first shipment of oil from Nigeria to overseas. Over years this expanded and there are 57 oil wells linked to 5 flow stations (oil field) in Ogoni. One of the flow stations named Bodo west field is located in the mangrove heartland of Bodo Creek. The Trans Niger Pipeline (TNP), which transports between 120,000 and 150,000 barrels per day of crude oil from the Niger Delta hinterlands to the Bonny oil terminal traverses the Bodo Creek. In spite of the suspension of oil production following the high marks of the Ogoni struggle of the 1990s led by MOSOP, the TNP remains active and makes the environment along its tracks vulnerable to oil spills (CEHRD, 2008; Zabbey and Uyi, 2014). Threats and incidents of oil spills in the Ogoni area are compounded by uncapped wellheads and flow stations, leaks

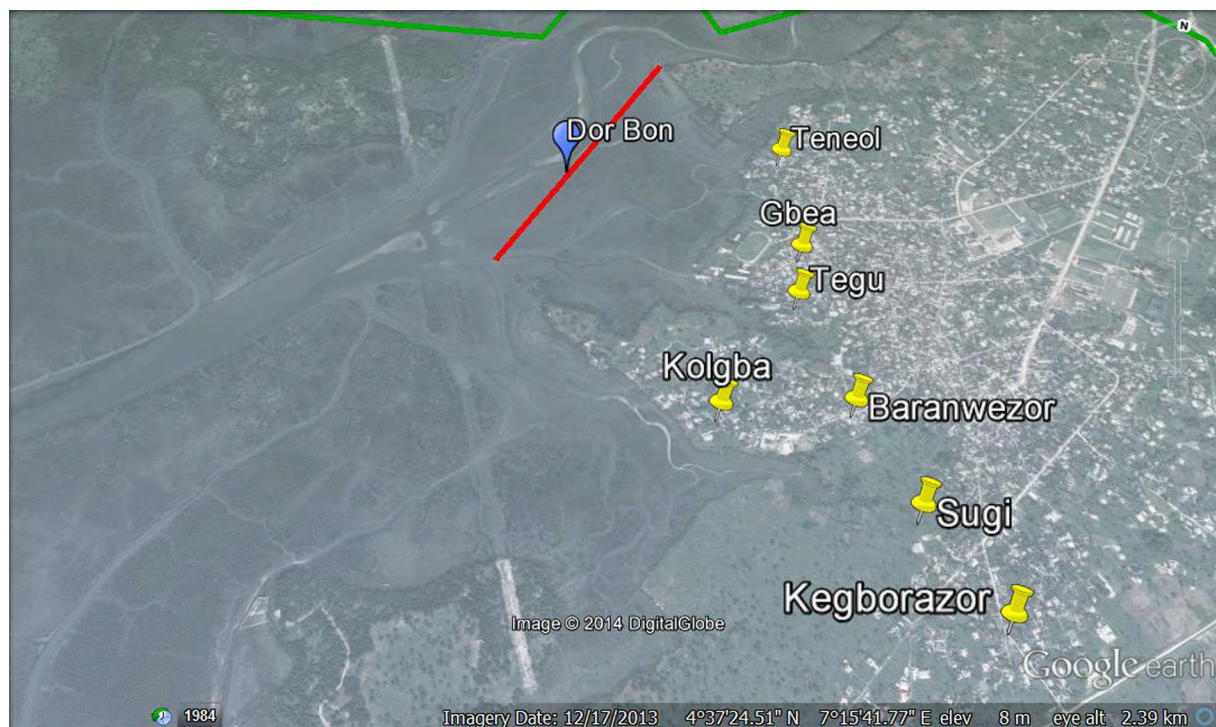


Fig. 1. Bodo coastal villages and Dor Bon (1).

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