

## CONFLICT RESOLUTION THROUGH DIALOGUE IN THE NIGER DELTA: LESSONS FROM J.P. CLARK'S THE WIVES' REVOLT

UMOLU, PAUL EDEGHONGHON

### Abstract

*Conflicts and conflicts resolutions are part and parcel of man's existential nature. But the Niger Delta question seems to defy all known solutions. Either the parties are not sincere at getting the issues resolved because certain people are benefiting or the government lacks the will power to confront the problem politically. The establishment of the National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS) and the current efforts at convening a national conference on the issue should help in proffering solutions to bring the crisis to an end. Drawing inferences from J. P. Clark's The Wives' Revolt, this study attempts to draw attention to the issue of lingering crises and the importance of dialogue at resolving the conflict permanently.*

### Introduction

The Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary describes conflict as being in opposition or disagreement. The resolution or settlement of such disagreements naturally brings peace. Conflict manifests in the form of fights, struggle or quarrels over something. It may also be something in opposition or disagreement with self or some other persons or groups. Thus, we can classify conflict into two areas; Intra-personal or inter-personal. Intra-personal conflict comes within the individual in the form of indecisions, thoughts, choices and interest, manifesting in the person's inability to make decisions and choices. Inter-personal conflict on the other hand involves two or more persons, groups, communities and or nations and between a group and a nation. Thus over the years our country has witnessed various conflicts. In the past we saw a civil war arising from the conflict between Biafra and the Federal Government of Nigeria. The Jos Riots, Kano and Kaduna riots and the one currently ravaging the Niger Delta of Nigeria.

Conflict is part and parcel of man's existence. There is conflict of ideas; political, economic and/or social conflicts. Thus, we find that conflict is central in all human endeavours, which has led many authorities to believe that it is part of man's existential essence. According to Ifeanyi Peters (2006), "conflict is a situation in which people, groups or countries are involved in serious disagreements or arguments. Conflict is a necessary process of life ...". This opinion does not mean that conflict cannot be managed. Infact, if properly handled can bring a positive change in the original situation, and bring lasting peace.

Similarly, conflict situations not properly handled could degenerate into violence and crises, gender violence kidnapping and youth restiveness which we are currently witnessing in the Niger Delta of Nigeria.

It is possible to manage conflict as we currently have in the Niger Delta Region to achieve peace. The situation in the Niger Delta did not just begin today. Tunji Azeez (2004), asserts that "... since the 1960s the Nigerian social-political landscape is besmeared with various categories of violence ... violence instigated and carried out by youths of particular communities against agents of the state ... (198)". All the regions in the Nigerian nation state have recorded different categories of violence mentioned above, and the Niger Delta situation appears to defy all the approaches that have been adopted by stake holders towards conflict resolution. Azeez (2004) further affirms that:

.....While in some parts of the country, such violence or skirmishes have been quelled permanently, the Niger Delta has remained a volatile spot for one category or the other of their violence listed above. The reason for this is not far fetched. The Niger Delta has, since the early 70's remained the major contributors to Nigeria's foreign exchange (19-20).

The fact that the Niger Delta contributes over 70% of the nation's foreign exchange earnings also means that over two third of the revenue required for the implementation of the National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS) programmes will come from the region. Unfortunately, the volatile and hostile environment in the Niger Delta is affecting the production of the much needed "black gold" and therefore puts the successful implementation of NEEDS in serious jeopardy. To resolve the conflicts and reduce violence and youth restiveness in the area, there is need to identify obvious causes of these and map out strategies of dialogue to address them. Economic dependence, gender in-equality, deprivation and unemployment are some of the causes of conflict in the region. Clark (1999) further recommends protest, dialogue, economic empowerment and poverty alleviation as imperatives of conflict resolution. The pre-occupation of the researcher in this study is to assess the recommended imperatives in The Wives' Revolt, juxtapose them with the variables targeted by NEEDS, to ascertain their effectiveness in alleviating the socio-political and economic predicament of the Niger Delta and the entire nation.

### **The Niger Delta, NEEDS and Conflict Resolution**

In the recent times issues of the Niger Delta has been on the front burner of Nigeria's political history. Henry Bell-Gam (2003) offers a definition of the Niger Delta which views it from two perspectives. In defining the geographical Niger Delta, he says: it is essential to note that the rivers discharging Niger-Benue waters into the sea are Rivers forcados, marking the Western boundary of Bayelsa State, and St. Nicholas and Santa Barbara on the eastern margins, through Rivers State into Akwa-Ibom, which have been part of the Region. These states, he says, can be classified as the geographical Niger Delta. He points out that the political Niger Delta was expanded to form the Niger Delta Development Commission NDDC. This includes the following states: Abia, Akwa-Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo, Imo, Rivers and Ondo (132). Thus, this study is situated within the geographical Niger Delta.

In spite of the massive oil exploration, drilling and exportation going on in the Niger Delta, the region is desperately in need of development, in terms of basic infrastructural facilities like portable water, electricity, good roads and employment opportunities. Environmental and water pollution from drilling activities, pipeline vandalization and gas flaring are peculiar hazards in the region. This has drastically reduced aquatic life, the main source of livelihood of the inhabitants of the region. Adeyemo and Abibalanori corroborate the point being made about the Niger Delta when they contend that:

Ecological problems include pollution occasioned by oil spillage, sandy, porous and salty soil, too much rainfall, agricultural land degradation, fisheries depletion, biodiversity loss, water hyacinth proliferation and coastal erosion (79).

The multi-national oil companies like Shell (SPDC), Chevron, Elf, Mobil, Texaco, Agip, etc, operating in the Niger Delta have done very little in the area of developing the place in terms of provision of infrastructural facilities and human resources development. Most of the companies mentioned above are not on the ground in the rural and riverine communities where oil is drilled. They just come and go back to the few urban and already developed cities like Port Harcourt, Warri and Eket where they have offices without establishment of their presence in any form in the rural communities. Consequently, the rural communities become antagonistic and resort to conflicts. Udem Ekpo (2003) reveals that:

Militant youths, numbering about 500 had invaded the premises of the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) in Port Harcourt, Rivers State, to make demands including what they called "direct empowerment"...(4)

Even though the oil companies are trying to diffuse tension in the Niger Delta through payment of compensation to oil producing communities, the situation is still the same. Several reasons account for the ugly situation. In most cases the people's representatives (the political class) deprive them of the compensation money. The government has not played its role in harmonizing the developing strategy of the region with the communities and the oil companies. The realization of this lapse has led the Federal Government to set up the National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS), to tackle the Niger Delta question. The NEEDS mission statement, in part, states that:

The plan for prosperity must address a sterling paradox: about two thirds of the Nigerian people are poor; despite living in a country with vast potential wealth... In 1980 an estimated 27 percent of Nigerians lived below the poverty line. By 1999, about 70 percent of the population had income less than \$1 a day (19).

This widespread poverty in the land is not restricted to the Niger Delta alone. With massive retrenchment going on, lack of jobs for our teeming youths, how NEEDS intend to resolve the Niger Delta problem remains to be seen. NEEDS outlines the following under the sub theme “promoting peace and security” as areas of priority attention:

- Ø to promote peace and security, a national action plan will
  - Ø Reform the security sector
  - Ø Reorient police officers to offer more people-friendly service
  - Ø Establish an early warning and response system that will detect conflicts
  - Ø Provide a fairer allocation of resources and responsibilities between the Federal and State Governments
  - Ø Maintain conflict prevention by establishing structures and processes that promote a peaceful culture.
- (27)

It is however important to note that dialogue is a crucial prerequisite in the implementation of these programmes. Secondly, vulnerable youths and women must be empowered if any success is to be achieved in this regard.

### **Lessons from J. P. Clark's *The Wives' Revolt* as Antidotes to Conflict in the Niger Delta**

J. P. Clark stands out as one of the pioneer African dramatists to have given African literature form and identity. Like Wole Soyinka, Ola Rotimi and others, Clark has not failed to use his creative intellect to bring to the fore problems confronting his people. Thus his Ijaw origin is a major influence on his works. His exploration of his cultural influence is as fascinating as his portrayal of his native Ijaw cosmology in his plays. His artistic expedition into Ijaw oral traditions in *Ozidi* is a testimony to the fact that African oral literature remains a rich reservoir from which African writers can draw an inspiration.

Clark explores in *The Wives' Revolt*, the colonial tendency of male chauvinism as a source of conflict. The interpersonal conflict between the men and women of Erhuwaren is so artistically elongated in the play to portray this problem. Thus espousing some approaches to conflict resolution which will be of tremendous benefit to the successful implementation of the National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy programmes in the Niger Delta.

*The Wives' Revolt* is a play which deals with the subject of conflict and conflict resolution. It opens with Okoro the town crier making a proclamation, lamenting the present state of affairs in Erhuwaren town. The crisis in the oil producing community stems from the compensation money paid by the oil company operating in the town. The money was shared into three parts; one part for the elders, one part for the men and the third part for the women. The women reject the sharing formula insisting that the money should have been shared into two equal halves, one half for women and the other half for the men. Of course this is viewed as an abomination in the customary laws of the land. In addition, the men went further to accuse the women of keeping destructive domestic animals at home. They are accused of witchcraft by taking the shape of these animals to terrorize

innocent people in the community. Thus a law banning the keeping of domestic animals in the community is promulgated.

The women see this as a denial of their rights to empowerment. Hence they embark on a protest in the form of self exile. This leads to a dialogue with the other community from where the women returned with a contagious disease. After the dialogue, a compromise is reached. The men agree to repeal the law banning the domestication of animals by women. They also agree to invite a team of doctors and nurses from Warri who cure the women of their ailments. The women are compensated and a trust fund is set up with part of the oil money. With this peace is restored to the community. The women are compensated and with it came harmony.

In *The Wives' Revolt* Clark shows that the life of people involve conflicts. In the play as in the Niger Delta today, Clark shows that conflict usually involves two parties. The cause and effect in the play as in Nigeria's real life situation today is the oil money and the burden men bore by the massive self exile of the women. Today Nigeria is in a nightmare because of the action or inaction of past and present leaders. We know this through the words of the town crier:

It is the matter of the money sent by the oil company operating on our land. This sum after due debate in the town hall has been shared out in three equal parts, one going to the elders of the town, the second to the men... and the third to the women...(1).

This sharing formula is rejected by the women thus triggering the protest. This is re-emphasized by the town crier:

However our women folk led by a few reckless ones, fed up of doing simple duties for their husbands and children as befits good housewives are repudiating this fair and reasonable distribution of the money, demanding that it should have been divided into two equal parts, one going to them and the other to the men...(1)

In the view of the women, there is no reason why the elders should be separated from the men. This practice enables men to get double share, thus disempowering the women economically because they are given less of the oil money. Not only that, the men enact and implement a law banning goats from the town claiming that women take the form of goats through witchcraft to torment innocent citizens. Erhuwaren men, through Koko, defend the law thus:

And it is also in the strictest interest of the community that we have passed the law banning goats from town. We cannot have goats wandering about our streets and home- stead uncontrolled. It was enough having them fill the place with filth, but now that we know they also provide refuge for forces of evil, oh yes, that wherever there is a herd of goats there is a coven of witches...(7).

Despite the oppressive policies of the Erhuwaren men, the women did not resort to violence, kidnapping or vandalization and looting of property. Instead they engaged in a peaceful protest of self exile which was ultimately resolved through dialogue. Here, Clark brings to his readers and in fact the generality of Nigerians the positive aspects of resolving conflict through dialogue. Through Koko, Okoro's wife, the women begin the process of dialogue. She declares that: Life is going to be so much worse, if you don't listen to us women while making your laws... (14). She goes further to affirm the position of women: Oh just repeal that law, and give us our fair share of the money... (14).

Unfortunately, men like the Federal Government of Nigeria are not responsive. They are adamant to the demands of the women. The Federal Government, like the men of Erhuwaren, thinks that the people of the Niger Delta should not have a say in how the natural resources in their land should be administered. Like the restive youths, by the time the women embarked on the self exile, panic grips the men as now with the armed youths of the Niger Delta. Idama, out of frustration, laments that: Yes our wives are gone: they have walked out on us; they have emigrated in protest against our unjust law... (19).

Today, the government has been forced to begin a process of dialogue with the Niger Delta people. The playwright justifies dialogue and peaceful protest as effective imperatives for conflict resolution because the women utilized it effectively to force the men to respond to their demands. Their dialogue and peaceful protest serve as instrument of consciensitization since men are now conscious of the rights and position of women. Again, in the words of Idama: Well, right now they are asserting their rights to own and keep property and nobody knows how far they will go in their claim.... (20).

Empowerment (economic and political) is another crucial issue addressed by Clark in the play. The treatment of the issue brings to the fore how crucial this is in the resolution of the Niger Delta question. Thus there is the urgent need for the government to speed up the national dialogue on the Niger Delta. Right now there are media reports that the leaders of the Niger Delta have rejected Alhaji Ibrahim Gambari as the government nominee to chairman the conference. Well, although the federal government has the right to appoint whoever it likes but one would have wished that such an appointee is one who is disposed to the plight of the Niger Delta. Gambari, to say the least, is an antagonist to the collective will of the people of the Niger Delta. If the government is actually sincere about solving the problem of the area, then people like Ibrahim Gambari must be left out of it. There is also the need to empower social groups like women and youths through proper utilization of the compensation money by the leaders of the Ijaw communities. This, Clark amplifies in the play, but still the playwright believes that this must be achieved through peaceful means. Thus while they were in exile, the women still explored the dialogue option, as indicated by Idama: Either the goats are in or the women stay out. Which one do you want? (32).

Eventually, the men see reasons why the women should be empowered, the need to resolve the conflict and bring peace to the community. Finally, the conflict is resolved as the men yield to reason as announced by Okoro the town crier: ...to bring peace and harmony back to town, back to the home, it makes my heart sweet all over to be able to announce that with immediate effect, even as I am speaking, the obnoxious law banning all manner of goats from our city...is hereby revoked... (59). With regard to the oil money, Okoro further says that:

As for the original matter of the oil company money that started all this fire, let it be known here and now that it was not such a big sum of money. Certainly not so big that it was going to change the condition of our lives permanently for better. It has left the poor, poorer, and the rich perhaps a little richer as our oil continues to flow to enrich other people across the country ... (60).

The implications of those imperatives of conflict resolution to the successful implementation of National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS) are obvious. For NEEDS to succeed in the Niger Delta there is the need for the agency to adopt the use of dialogue and negotiation. Protest on the side of the indigenes must not be violent; rather it should be peaceful and constructive. The revenue allocation formula must be revisited and made to give more to those whose environments are being degraded through oil exploration activities.

### **The Role of the Mass Media**

Across media circles, the “CNN effect” has become a popular parlance. This is derived from the perceived influence on governments in her coverage of global events. Similarly, it is believed that the news media have the ability to influence government policies geared towards the resolution of crises and conflicts. In the international arena, it is believed that when media coverage of conflicts is sustained, governments are usually encouraged if not forced to develop policies to resolve such conflicts. The ongoing peace initiative between Israel and the Palestinians is a classic example. There are other examples in the case of the Bosnian Question in the 1990s. The list is probably endless. But in the case of the Niger Delta of Nigeria, there are multifarious questions that obviously come to mind in terms of the level of attention the Nigerian news media has paid to the situation. Secondly, has the media coverage led to a development of an effective development plan by government for the area? Is the lack of plan to resolve the conflict a result of the lack of media coverage of the crisis?

It is no longer a matter of argument that the Niger Delta crisis is a national tragedy. For a country that prides itself as the giant of the African continent, it has taken a handful of militant youths to draw attention to the neglect which a region that sustains the nation's economic fabric is passing through. The fire brigade approach to issues of the Niger Delta is a clear indication that there is no planned programme of action to address permanently the issues of the Niger Delta. Although the federal government, through the Vice President is

convening a national conference on the Niger Delta, it is still unclear how the national conference will address the issues involved. This is where the media must come in. In line with the agenda setting function, the mass media must point out the direction, set the people to work and like the CNN, continue to put the issue of the Niger Delta on the front burner. This way the government could be forced to do something that can be permanent.

## **Conclusion**

In exploring ways of achieving conflict resolution in the Niger Delta using J.P. Clark's The Wives' Revolt we posit that dialogue, negotiation, compensation, protests and empowerment are the imperatives of conflict resolution. The study also shows that oil money is the major cause of conflicts in the Niger Delta. In most cases, the representatives of the people hijack compensation money meant for equitable distribution and development in the community. Hence women and the youths are schemed out of economic and political activities because they are disempowered through denial of their basic economic and political rights. Clark supports the agitation for one's rights but he recommends non-violent approach of dialogue and peaceful protest. The adoption of these imperatives for conflict resolution by National Economic and Development Strategy in the Niger Delta is strongly recommended. NEEDS should address the issue of poverty in the Niger Delta and empower the youths.

That the Niger Delta region deserves more than what it is given from the oil revenue is no longer in doubt. Though the oil is for all Nigerians, the oil companies must do a little bit more to develop the host communities through empowerment programmes and development projects. As enunciated by Olatunde Makanju (2007) the solutions to the Niger Delta problem lies in the following:

1. Oil companies should release a list of opinion leaders who have in the past received cheques on behalf of their communities. NAS believes that the list shall set the pace and prepare grounds for investigation of the whereabouts of such funds and possible prosecution of those who have embezzled communal funds;
2. A Niger Delta Trust Fund should be established by the Federal government. This fund should be similar to the ALASKA PETROLEUM FUND (North America) and the STATE PETROLEUM FUND (Norway). Nigeria should understudy resource control policies in Norway, USA and Canada and consider the Alaska and Norway paradigms as models for the much touted NIGER DELTA MASTER PLAN. The fund shall service infrastructural development in all oil producing states.

## **Recommendations**

1. A special police unit should be established in the region to protect oil and gas installations, turbines and distribution lines to guard frequent interruptions in the oil and gas industry. Perhaps, indigenes of the Niger Delta can be put to work to guard such installations. We can thus monitor their performance as productive citizens. The use of the military in the name of task force can only heighten tension.

2. An education fund should be established to guarantee students' loans for undergraduate and graduate studies for the peoples of the Niger Delta.
3. Establishing a human resource centre to cater for the needs of the unemployed of the region.
4. Establishing a health policy that caters for free consultation and free treatment of some ailments as well as free drug prescriptions for students, the unemployed and senior citizens.
5. Establishing rural electrification programme (solar, wind, hydro) to power towns, cities, schools and hospitals in the Niger Delta regions. Such act will be a model for Nigeria's fully integrated development.
6. The criminalization of militancy and hostage taking cannot be overemphasized since these acts are at variance with the vision and aspiration of genuine struggles for de-pollution, resource control and an acceptable revenue allocation formula.
7. The federal government should immediately put machinery in motion to demilitarize the region and stem the high and ugly tide of militancy.

Over and above this, it is said that heaven helps those who help themselves. Therefore, the Niger Deltans especially the youths must work towards attitudinal change. As epitomized by the women in J.P. Clark's *The Wives' Revolt*, they must stop wreckless spending on drinking alcohol and marrying more women. They must embark on meaningful ventures and invest in the education of their children. The federal government through NEEDS and the NDDC should embark on a deliberate plan of negotiation and peaceful resolution of conflicts by exploring the examples portrayed in *The Wives' Revolt*.

### References

- Adeyemo, A.M. and Azibalanori, N. (2000). Bayelsa State. In . A.B. Mamman, J.O. Oyebanji, and S W. Petters (Eds), *Nigeria: A People United, A Future Assured*. Vol.2. Abuja: Federal Ministry of Information.
- Azeez, T. (2004). Eating their shit: An appraisal of the production process of "yes ... but you see..." in resolving the crises in the oil producing communities in Nigeria. *Nigerian Theatre Journal*, 198-216.
- Bell-Gam, H. (2003). Theatre and environmental rights: Options for the Niger Delta. *Abalabala: A Journal of the Bayelsa State Council for Arts and Culture*, 2:131-139.
- Clark, J.P. (1999). *The Wives' Revolt*. Ibadan: University Press.
- Ekpo, U. (2003, April 22). NDDC and youth empowerment initiative in the Niger Delta. *Vanguard*, on line edition, retrieved from <http://www.vanguardngr.com>.
- Hornby, A.S. (2006). *Oxford advanced learners dictionary of contemporary English*. London: Oxford University Press.
- National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy. (2004). Abuja: National Planning Commission.
- Ifeanyi, P. (2006). *Conflict management, prevention and resolution*. Lagos: Liz Publishers,
- Makanju, O. (2007). Explorative abuse and perennial crisis The way out of the Niger Delta debacle. Retrieved Nov. 15, from <http://www.nas-int.org>.