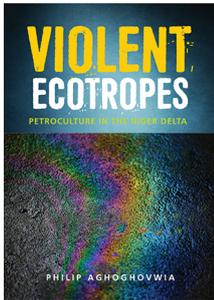




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# And the band played on: Conflict-preneurship and the long history of violence in the Niger Delta

As I read Philip Aghoghovwia's *Violent Ecotopes: Petroculture in the Niger Delta*, I could not help but appreciate the echoes of Rob Nixon's<sup>1</sup> *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. The slow violence in the Niger Delta is an ugly symptom of a runaway extractive economy. The adage, 'the more deadly virus is not HIV/Aids, it is greed', comes to mind. In this publication, the greed is not only confined to an enduring capitalist system but also local elites, something akin to what Umair Haque terms "a class of billionaires so amoral they'd make Caligula blush"<sup>2</sup>. It is because of this class of 'conflict-preneurs', to borrow a term from Akufo-Addo<sup>3</sup>, that the violence has continued unabated in the Niger Delta.

Luis Fernández Carril, writing about the staying power of capitalism in his essay, *The Ontological Crisis of the Anthropocene*, could not have agreed more:

*Life, capitalism, modern institutions, and political and economic systems seem inevitable, perennial, and immortal. As captured by the now famous adage: It is easier to imagine the end of time than to imagine the end of capitalism.*<sup>4</sup>

*Violent Ecotopes: Petroculture in the Niger Delta* offers a well-articulated and timely analysis of a major theme in contemporary development studies. The book engages local epistemologies and ontologies on the violence in the Niger Delta. Aghoghovwia's masterful use of literary works published between 1998 and 2015 points to the reality that the violent ecotopes are not a black swan event but a manifestation of local people's struggles from the colonial era. The author is to be commended for articulating perspectives from those who live on the margins of history. Violence is a recurring theme in the poetry collections of the Delta, an issue that is troubling to the author.

Chapter 1 uses plays to "depict a tragic reality that attends everyday human existence in the Delta environment." The chapter grapples with the flaws of modernity as encapsulated by the Delta. The author attributes this to power struggles and coins the term petromodernity. Petromodernity is about making huge profits at a huge cost to the communities and the environment.

In the second chapter, the author uses fire as a metaphor. The chapter focuses on Ogaga Ifowodo's *The Oil Lamp* (Africa World Press, 2006). *The Oil Lamp* shows how fire is destructive to the environment. Fire is used as a metaphor for the destructive nature of neoliberalism. Neoliberalism with its attendant apocalyptic horsemen (disease, poverty, violence) wreaks havoc on the communities. Ifowodo and a host of writers "put under the spotlight the overwhelming social and ecological deprivations suffered by the citizenry, the denial of basic rights, and the fate of the postcolonial nation under corrupt military regimes."

Chapter 3 discusses the latent violence in the Delta. Ibiwari Ikiriko's *Oily Tears of the Delta* (Kraftgriots, Ibadan, 2000) depicts how the infrastructure of oil extraction becomes an arena of contested power. *Oily Tears* is a call to arms. The literary works in this chapter are critical of what the author terms "oily" intrusions into the Delta. The "oily" intrusions have caused a lot of suffering as seen by the displacements in the Delta.

Chapter 4 analyses the Nollywood film *The Liquid Black Gold* (Executive Image African Movies, 2008). *The Liquid Black Gold* grapples with the violence associated with oil extraction in the Delta. According to Aghoghovwia, *The Liquid Black Gold* discusses the generational rivalry between the young and the old, a product of a gerontocracy culture. This has resulted in tensions in the communities. The chapter also draws on the works of Frantz Fanon (*The Wretched of the Earth*, Grove Press, 1961) and Rob Nixon (*Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*). Fanon's work is premised on resisting imperialism. Nixon argues about the impact of what he terms "slow violence" on the locals and the environment.

The author shows the complexity of the Niger Delta conflict. On one hand, there is the brutality of international capital, and on the other, is the evil nature of the disaster of capitalism as encapsulated by local conflict entrepreneurship. The book reflects the Hobbesian nature of life which is nasty, brutish and short. The people in the Niger Delta have suffered for so long. There seems to be no light at the end of the tunnel. One is inclined to argue that solutions that have been and are being proffered to solve the conflict in the Delta amount to Orwellian dishonesty and Potemkin facades meant to hoodwink the local communities.

In line with the above observations, the title of Mary Trump's book *Too Much and Never Enough*<sup>5</sup> resonates with the insatiable greed of the Delta Region's conflict-preneurs, who have realised that the spoils of conflict far outweigh initiatives for peace. They have benefitted handsomely from the conflict, and so they have dug in. A term in the field of disaster management used about conflict-preneurship is disaster capitalism. Disaster capitalism is the use of catastrophe in conflict and post-conflict situations to promote and empower a range of private, neoliberal capitalist interests. What is being witnessed in the Niger Delta is disaster capitalism, therefore the use of the term could have enriched the book.

Addressing environmental turmoil is fundamentally about advancing social justice. Questions of justice are critical to *Violent Ecotopes*. The author could have engaged more with the different dimensions of justice. These dimensions range from who gets what (distributional justice) and whose knowledge (epistemic justice), to who gets to decide (procedural justice) and ultimately who gets left behind (recognition justice).<sup>6</sup>

Also, Yuval Noah Harari's overhasty jump theory<sup>7</sup> could be useful in understanding the Niger Delta's long history of violence. According to Harari, humans rose to the top of the food chain in a relatively short time. In a bid to solidify their position at the top, humans have become brutal. Humans will go out of their way to eliminate other

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species (including their own) to remain at the top of the food chain. Thus, humanity's overhasty jump is one of the major reasons for violence, and, I strongly believe, what hinders successful outcomes in a multi-species approach to environmental management. As already alluded to, humans will protect their place at the top of the food chain at any cost. Perhaps it is time to address humanity's insecurity at the top of the food chain. Part of the solution is the realisation that a multi-species approach means a win-win for all species.

*Violent Ecotropes* is well articulated, intellectually stimulating and provides new knowledge about the conflict in the Niger Delta. The chapters are concise and make interesting reading. I therefore very highly recommend the book.

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