

The Shadows of Oloibiri

Oloibiri town, formerly in Rivers State, and now in the present Bayelsa State is a serene, rustic, and poor village whose inhabitants live in absolute economic deprivation. It is the place where Nigeria began its triumphant entry into the league of oil producing nations. Historic accounts depict that the thrilling search for oil in Nigeria started in 1907 when exploration rights were granted to the Nigerian Bitumen Corporation, which was a Nigerian arm of a German company. Industry historians believe that the Nigeria Bitumen Corporation discovered oil in a commercial quantity, but could not continue because of the cataclysmic interruption of the First World War which caused the cessation of the company's operations in Nigeria, and additionally due to political reasons, Britain, Nigeria's colonial master at the time, did not want any company that had no ties with the British government to conduct oil searches in Nigeria.

The second search for oil in Nigeria commenced again in 1930 by the Royal/Dutch Shell company. The country's oil historical record shows that Shell-BP struck the first oil finding at the Akata – 1 well in 1953. However, the defining major oil finding which launched Nigeria into the limelight was at Oloibiri in 1956. Prior to this year when the multinational giant, Shell, discovered crude oil in commercial quantity there, nothing much was known about Oloibiri. However, after the discovery of oil in Oloibiri, many were attracted to this historic town. Additionally, Dr. Goodluck Ebele Jonathan, the current vice president of Nigeria was once a pupil of St. Michael's Primary School in Oloibiri.

The accounts of Chief Sunday Inengite of Bayelsa who was 19 years old in 1953 when serious oil exploration projects began in Oloibiri tells the story. With the presence of many British, German and Dutch engineers and geologists in the town, in a broadcasted chat with BBC News on "*The Day Oil was discovered in Nigeria*," Chief Inengite related, "I was trying to know why they were all here, going into the forests and into the swamps." He continued and recounted, "It wasn't until we saw what they called the oil – the black stuff – that we knew they were after something different."

Something really different! While Nigeria basks in glory today as a top oil producing nation in Africa and in the world, Oloibiri, the town that gave Nigeria her first commercially drilled oil well, continues to be burned by the scorching flames of poverty and deprivation. The discovery of oil transformed Nigeria and gave her global recognition as a wealth zone with economic and political power, especially in the West African region. Oil also added glamour to the beauty of this nation which was once tied to the apron strings of Britain – her former colonialist. The importance of crude oil, and the power and revenue it generates, has made Nigeria attractive to the West, and it is currently being wooed by various Asian nations as well.

If there was any social transformation in Oloibiri as a result of oil operations there, such change was of an insignificant 'nano' dimension compared to the economic importance

of the town to the country of Nigeria and the amount of revenue which accrues to the nation through the oil and gas business today. With the gargantuan revenue earned from oil exploration and production, Oloibiri, if not for the horrendous negligence of the government and her strategic planners, could easily have become an “uptown” in the region. Instead, Oloibiri is, for the most part still gravely undeveloped and has a human population that has to scratch hard to just put food on their tables.

Oloibiri now remains a mere shadow of itself. Most of the wells in that historic oilpatch have aged far beyond their prime and have long been abandoned. The golden cow has been “milked-dry” and the carcass has been left to rot away. This infuriates the town’s community as they bemoan in utter rage the wholesale negligence of their town by the nation’s government. Among other things that disturbs this little, but historically important community, is the abandoning of the Oloibiri Oil and Gas Institute which had the foundation stone laid in 2001.

One new addition to Oloibiri is currently being, so that it all will not be clouds, rain and no sunshine is the peddled plans of the Bayelsa State government to build a Peace Center in the town. The Peace Center will be used for conflict resolution, negotiation, and pursuit of peace and justice in the region, which in the past three years has been riddled with much violence as a result of the indigenes protesting vehemently against what they called the negligence of the geese that lay the golden eggs.

Oloibiri is like many of the numerous villages in the Niger Delta region that are devoid of any expected level of development. It is also a classic example of the many rural areas in the sub-Saharan Africa oil producing nations that are grossly neglected in terms of development and have not justly benefited from their oil wealth. Whether it is in Oloibiri, Opuama, Cabinda, or Bioko Island, the shared signs of poverty are visibly written on all the lives of the people.

Generally, the vast majority of the human population in sub-Saharan nations lives in despicable squalor. What could be the reason for this, while billions of petrodollars are generated annually and these countries remain underdeveloped and their peoples are still plagued by abject poverty? The evidence points strongly toward the web of corruption being perpetrated by the various governments that have ruled these African nations over the years. Corruption, poor leadership and neglect of their people by the various cabals and juntas that have ruled these nations are largely responsible for the utter underdevelopment of many regions. Various internal conflicts like the 27-year-long war in Angola may also be considered a factor in the underdevelopment of some of these African nations.

Neo-economic revelations indicate that another factor to be considered is the way in which the business of oil has been conducted in some African countries – a factor that has encouraged serious capital flight out of these nations. Astute analysis of Nigeria as a resource – rich country that is yet still shackled in poverty shows that out of the US\$2.8billion revenues from upstream - related activities, the lion’s share of these profits went directly to foreign companies. This massive ejection of capital by various

foreign exploration and production companies and their service counterparts has added salt to the wound, thereby gravely hampering human and economic development.

The operations of some of the multi-nationals and foreign oil companies have been equally questionable. Most of the multi-nationals have been severely accused of disastrous pollution in the production areas as well as blatant human rights abuse. Shell was strongly accused of direct involvement in the hanging of Ken Saro Wiwa, the late activist and leader of the Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP) who was killed during the regime of Sanni Abacha in Nigeria. Halliburton's role in evading paying taxes in Nigeria and beefing up corruption in the region was a big disgrace as far as the manner in which some foreign companies continue to conduct business in Africa.