RE-ASSESSING THE NIGER DELTA OIL CONFLICT IN NIGERIA:
A SECURITISATION PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

This article re-assesses the protracted Niger Delta oil conflict by putting it into the context of securitisation theory. It argues that the application of the Copenhagen School’s perspective on securitisation on its own is not sufficient to provide a clear understanding of the state security strategy in the Niger Delta. It considers the Paris School version of securitisation theory and demonstrate that both the Copenhagen and Paris Schools’ versions of securitisation theory are not methodologically incompatible. The article employs both qualitative and quantitative methods of data gathering and analysis. The findings offer statistical evidence of the coercive nature of the state security apparatus. The result also demonstrates that by applying the Paris School strand of securitisation theory, the state strategic response to the Niger Delta oil conflict is both a product of security discourses and practices.

Keywords: Conflict, Nigeria, Niger Delta, Securitisation Theory.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Niger Delta region of Nigeria in the southern part of the country is regarded as one of the richest deltas in the world. Petters (2000:197) ranked it alongside other major deltas with crude oil and natural gas in the world such as the Amazon in Brazil, Orinoco in Venezuela, Mahakam in Indonesia and Mississippi in the United States of America. The region comprises of nine states out of the thirty seven in Nigeria. It is an area measuring about 16,000 square miles and roughly the size of Scotland. This massive wetland of the Niger Delta area renowned for its huge crude oil reserves covers an area of about 70,000 square kilometres spreading over coastal mangroves, freshwater swamps and lowland rain forests (Moffat & Linden, 1995). Within its challenging terrain are an estimated thirty million people known as the oil-minorities in Nigeria (Ukiwwo, 2011). These minority groups of people within the Nigerian state are made up of over three thousand ethno-linguistic communities.

The Ijaws that cut across the four states of Bayelsa, Delta, Ondo and Rivers remain the largest ethnic group in the region with about forty other ethnic groups (Ibaba, 2011:72; Petters, 2000:199). The daily survival of these minority groups of people is based on a mixture of subsistence farming, fishing and petty trading especially in palm oil (Frances et al. 2011; Jike, 2004). Despite the Niger Delta region, providing
Nigeria’s total proven reserves of oil standing close to 25 billion barrels as noted by Chiluwa (2011), which is an estimated 1.8 percent of the proven global reserves; the indigenous people are one of the most impoverished people in the world (Ahonsi, 2011:30). This is due to the underdevelopment of the region by successive Nigerian government administrations and the politics of exclusion inherent in the Nigerian political system (HRW, 2002). While the state and its ruling elite does not participate in the actual production of oil, it allocates the rents and profits from oil production (Ibaba, 2011:71-78). As a result, who benefits depends on one’s position or closeness to those at the top echelon of state power (Eberlein, 2006)

To further compound the deprivation of the local people is the oil production activities of Transnational Oil Corporations (TNOCs), which have also destroyed marine lives and endangered species such as iguanas and alligators that were in large number in the Niger Delta wetland (Jike, 2004). For a greater part of the year, toxic effluents from crude oil exploration and drilling mud are dumped in rivers and farmlands across the region, which in a way has undermined the environmental security of the indigenous people (Obi, 1997).

The ecological despoliation of the area has impacted the ability of the already impoverished people to survive by subsistence means (Frances et al. 2011). Oil spillage and the burning of excess natural gas extracted during oil pumping known as gas flaring, has created poor atmospheric conditions and contamination in the oil producing region of the Niger Delta (Uzodike & Isike, 2010; Moffat & Linden, 1995). Despite all these, Emeseh (2011) observed that the average Niger Delta inhabitant has no opportunity to seek legal redress because it can be costly, lengthy and complicated. A point also attested to by Obi (2004:19) in his analysis of the oil conflict. As a result, militancy becomes a means of reaching out to state political elites and TNOCs. Militancy based on violence and the struggle for power (Adunbi, 2011). The power that determine who controls the oil wealth. The need to have firm control over the oil space has made the state to devise numerous conflict intervention and security strategies of which militarization has been the most obvious (Emuedo, 2012; Owugah, 2010).

International relations scholars and conflict analysts have taken different views on the causes of violent conflicts in the Niger Delta. These views have led to a linkage between elites and national (in)security (Nwokpo, 2013; Olonisakin, 2008). This nexus, which is usually not so clear-cut, has often revolved around the role and behaviour of those who provide security and the end-users of security itself (Adelugba & Ujomu, 2008). The struggle over security for whom, by whom and how, has frequently thrown up a contest between those who allocate state resources and those at the receiving end on how to interpret national security as a concept that includes non-traditional military threats such as environmental degradation and human insecurity (Ukeje, 2011). This contestation has often thrown a searchlight on the role of African elites in conflict management both at the national or local level (Oshita, 2007; Job, 1992).

Conflicts such as the political instability witnessed in Angola, in the Cabinda Province between federal troops and separatist rebellion led by the Front for the Liberation of the Enclave of Cabinda (FLEC) (Obi, 2004). The one in the old Sudan that was about elite politics of accumulation that became a catalyst for political instability and contest between the opposing groups such as the Sudan People’s Liberation Army (SPLA) and also rebels from Darfur (Omeje, 2010). The exploitation and resulting civil war led to the breakup of the country. In Nigeria, the elite battle to maintain a stranglehold on the state because of oil-rent led to violent confrontations with the state and TNOS by militant youths in the Niger Delta (Luqman, 2011; Watts, 2005; Ikelegbe, 2001).
Literature exploring the contestation over the Niger Delta oil space has brought about different actors and different interpretations of national security (Amaraegbu, 2011; Obi & Rustad, 2011). In most of the studies, there are those who challenge the system of governance, thereby implicating the state political elite as source of conflict (Emuedo, 2012; Ikelegbe, 2011; Campbell, 2010; Alao, 2007). The argument being that while the stability of a country is necessary for the economic development of the state, the nature of security and governance reverses if those who govern themselves are the sources of insecurity (Owugah, 2010; Omeje, 2007; Oshita, 2007). Citing the heavy militarization and state use of coercive force in the oil producing communities such as Umuechem in 1990, Ogoniland in 1995, Yenagoa in 1998, Odi in 1999, Egbema in 2004, Odioma in 2005, Okkerenoko in 2006, Gbaramatu Kingdom in 2009, Ayankoromo in 2011 and so on as acts of state terrorism; where the state security apparatus in different military operations codenamed ‘Operation Andoni’, ‘Operation Fire-For-Fire’, ‘Operation Flush 1, 2 and 3’, ‘Operation Hakuri 1 and 2’, ‘Operation Strike Force’, ‘Operation Sweep’, ‘Operation Restore Hope’, ‘Operation Pulo Shield’ and so on under the military Joint Task Force (JTF) used the military force to counter anti-state threats or activities perceived to be in conflict with state interests with maximum force, as securitisation move that has yielded minimal results (Emuedo, 2012; Chiluwa, 2011; Frynas, 2001; HRW, 1999; 1995).

Despite the aforementioned, effort to analyse the Niger Delta oil conflict using the Securitisation Theory (ST) has raised growing concern within the academic circles. Concerns that have to do with the Western source of the theory and its emphasis on discourse analysis (Balzacq, 2011; Waever, 2004). This has led to questions such as can ST be applied to the analysis of the Niger Delta oil conflict as well as other major conflicts in sub-Saharan Africa? If it can be applied, will it be adequate or legitimately valid so as not to be described as methodologically flawed? This question stemmed from the fact that the Niger Delta oil conflict mainly has to do with environmental security and mode of governance (Obi, 2004). Two issues that can be described as non-traditional security because it does not involve the traditional interstate military conflict. To advance the ongoing debate on the applicability of ST to the Niger Delta oil conflict, this article argues that:

- The ‘speech act’ theory of securitisation as articulated by the Copenhagen School laid so much emphasis on the utterances of securitisation actors at the detriment of other important factors such as security perceptions and actual security practices of state actors.
- A major consequence of this is the exclusion of a great deal of the security dynamic unravelling in the Niger Delta such as the extension of routine security operations from one conflict zone to another without any identifiable speech act by the state elites to legitimise the exceptional security measures as Copenhagen School envisaged.
- This neglect of actual security practice is a major theoretical gap within the Copenhagen School that underestimates how practice can precede or supersede public discourse in the security scheming of state actors, especially in sub-Saharan Africa.
- There is the need to accommodate both the Copenhagen School and the Paris School versions of ST in analysing the Niger Delta oil conflict in order to develop a theoretical apparatus capable of explaining the gaps between security discourse and actual security practice.
2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The theory of ‘securitisation’ has grown in complexity since it was first articulated in international relations (McDonald, 2008). Taureck (2006) described it as a product of the Copenhagen School (CS) that came about in the mid-1980s to counterbalance the traditional approach of security, which was primarily concerned with military threats against the state. The traditional approach to security is a reflection of the theoretical positions of the realist school of thought as contained in both the classical and neo-realist modes. Ibeanu & Momoh (2008) explained that security from the realists point, is viewed from a state-centric perspective where the political elite of a state attributes what constitute security to the ability of the state to exploit and regulate all legitimate instruments of coercion. Buzan, Waever and Wilde (1998:52) highlighted another realist view that the state is the primary referent of security, and security should be conceived in terms of the management and control of real or perceived threats to the state. The neo-realists perspective, such as Walt (1991:212), viewed security as any action to do with the threats, use and control of military force, that states adopt in order to prepare for, prevent or engage in war. Waltz (1979) summed this up in his view, articulating that military power is the major instrument in achieving security.

As a result, security in the traditional sense tends to focus on external military threats and the ability of the state to maintain its territorial integrity by protecting its institutions from external threats through its ability to deter and defend; and at the same time the ability to ignore or overcome others’ ability to deter and defend (Abubakar et al. 2010; Smith, 2005; Acharya, 1997). Hence, within the traditional view, the state becomes the referent object of security. Consequently, according to Booth (2004:5), the state has to survive by maximizing its power through the use of military force as an instrument of policy. This point of view indicates that threats can only be external rather than internal. However, Critical Security Studies (CSS) theorists has critiqued this assumption and questioned realists for being overly statist and privileging military power as the basis for providing security (Booth, 2007:34-36).

With the end of the Cold War came the emergence of new security threats that were not wholly internal but transnational in scope. As a result, Bhonsle (2004:81) observed that the concept of security was widened both in definition and scope by scholars who tried to move away from “a narrow perspective of securitisation of the state”. Subsequently, the referent object of security was no longer the state. The focus was shifted to individuals and state actors (traditionally known as political elites), and how these actors could be a source of threat to the state, and vice versa. Snyder (1999:2), described this as an exemplary shift from a military focused state-centric perception of security to a wider and interdependent non-military view of the concept of security. The ‘Wideners’ also proposed alternative approaches to addressing new and emerging security threats rather than the use of force as propounded by realists within the traditional realm. The work of the CS laid the foundation for the new security thinking in the post-Cold War era.

The CS security theory was built on concepts advanced by its core members Barry Buzan (1991) and Ole Waever (1995). Capie (2007) articulates how it has expanded the concept of security to embrace non-military threats against varied referent objects of security than that of just the state alone. In doing so, certain theoretical concepts such as ‘securitisation’ was developed as a theoretical tool for security analysis (Waever, 1995). A theoretical tool, according to Balzacq (2005) and Scott (2011), that looks at language or discourse as the object of analysis. Gad and Petersen (2011) described securitisation as “the framing of political issues or threats in terms of
extraordinary measures, survival and urgency that render the politics of security unique and makes it something beyond normal politics”.

Buzan (1991) looked closely at a collective of issues that might endanger the survival of a referent object of security. Those issues that could either be military, societal, economic, political or environmental threats he referred to as ‘existential threats’ (Stone, 2009). However, Striztel (2007) argued that by constructing and disseminating issues as existential threats through a particular speech act, securitisation actors are only trying to make the targeted audience accept security intervention that would ordinarily not have been accepted by the audience.

Scholars such as Balzacq (2011) have critiqued the speech act of CS by questioning its discursive approach. Barthwal-Datta (2009) questioned the process-audience conundrum of the theory using the alleged mis-governance in Bangladesh as a case study. Wilkinson (2007) also queried the applicability of the theory outside its Western source by questioning whether it can be applied to analyse security strategies of non-European states, where securitisation moves in places like Africa, often preclude discourse or is done covertly away from the public glare.

To understand the politics of security decision-making, the Paris School (PS) of securitisation, which is a variant of CS, offered a relational understanding of discourse and practice by introducing the Bourdieusian notion of ‘field’ (Waever, 2004; Bigo, 2001; Bourdieu, 1998:83-84). Didier Bigo (cited in Hameiri & Jones, 2013), a leading figure of PS, explained that the field is a network of professionals or security agents that can shape or define threats, or authorise the domestic deployment of the military to conflict zones. Salter and Mutlu (2013) from another perspective, looked at this international political sociology approach as the scholarly effort to identify how state agents can develop security practices and discourses, in the name of protecting national security.

The PS provides the platform to assess the role of state agents through their security practices, which have often revealed patterns different to those found by studying official discourse. This brings about the main argument of the Paris scholars that rather than have securitisation theorised solely on discourse analysis, attention should also be given to the actual security practices of the state and its security apparatus in the conflict zones. Waever (2004) of the CS fame agreed that the PS perspective can be advantageous in analysing conflict situations because, it maps security practices and documents routine deviation from official policies. The analytical effectiveness and theoretical value of PS lies in its ability to unravel securitisation moves that preclude public discourse or securitisation moves done in silence. The rest of the article looks at the application of the theory to the Niger Delta oil conflict situation.

3. MATERIALS AND METHOD

To deliver the remit of the study that investigates the Nigerian political elite perception and construction of security strategies in the Niger Delta, the research adopted a triangulation approach that mixed both qualitative and quantitative research methods at different level of inquiry (Maxwell, 2010; Woolley, 2009; Bryman, 2006). Given that the study is to investigate elites’ security perceptions and practices, the researcher sought to engage with empirical evidence of how these groups of people (Nigerian political elite and security decision-makers) view, analyse and interprets national security in Nigeria. Data were sourced from both primary and secondary sources due to the nature of the study that cut across the elite-security-governance conundrum (Julius, 2013). The mediums used included press archives that comprised of national newspapers, archives of research institutes, data from biographies, journal
articles, government and non-governmental organisations reports, online materials and notes transcribed from the recordings of face-to-face interviews.

The data also provided insight into people’s perception and accounts of the state response to the oil conflict. The recurring themes elicited from the data were categorised into two groups. Themes such as securitisation, militarization and criminalization of youth were grouped as hard power. Others such as stick and carrot approach, political amnesty, development programmes, non-militarisation were grouped as soft power. The frequency of their occurrence was counted and the computation of percentages was then undertaken and presented in diagrams as shown in Figures 1 and 2 under the Findings and Discussions section. All these were done to enhance the theoretical and historical explanations of the study and to uncover and assess the circumstances of national security planning in Nigeria. The press cuttings specifically provided views, facts and accounts of national security issues. The interviews gave an insight into different interpretations of Nigerian security issues. Although elites and political leaders are reputed for consciously or unconsciously leaving out vital information during interviews (Mikecz, 2012; Berry, 2002; Moyser & Wagstaffe, 1987), gathering data from other sources allowed the researcher to fill in any missing gaps. Reports were useful in unravelling the state responses to security challenges in the oil producing delta. The online materials revealed the nature and context of Nigerian security challenges and how the government has responded to its real or perceived security threats. The articles provided the different perspectives and analysis in the context of conflict in the region.

The types of data chosen for the study allowed the researcher to track the different phases of the elite securitisation move and the level of militarization in the Niger Delta. This is referred to as longitudinal research (Ruspini, 2000) meaning the ability to conduct research either prospectively (forward) or retrospectively (back over time). The data were analysed using a mixture of qualitative and quantitative analysis methods (Julius, 2013). This was carried out using document and content analysis, which enabled the evaluation of government security response (actual security practice) to security challenges as opposed to what the state policies are in dealing with security issues. Responses from the oral interviews conducted in the course of the fieldwork were transcribed from the tape recorder and insightful comments were identified and used as samplers to buttress some of the points already identified during the document and content analysis of the other data. Using these methods allowed for the assessment of elites’ perception of security through their responses and articulated view which ultimately impact on the formulation of security strategies.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The findings from the study illustrated in Figures 1 and 2 reflects the political elites and the Niger Delta inhabitants’ perceptions of the government’s conflict management approach to the Niger Delta oil conflict between 2000 and 2012. The findings indicate a mixture of security strategies, using hard and soft power at different point in time over the 12 years period. The political elites perceived the state to have used more hard power strategies to manage its oil conflict between the period 2001 and 2002.
In 2004, the elites felt the state adopted more non-coercive means to address the Niger Delta security situation compared to its use of hard power tactics. The political elites felt that a significant proportion of state instrument of hard power was implemented between 2005 and 2007 and again in 2009. During this period, the Niger Delta inhabitants also felt that the government responses have been more of hard power than soft power. However, from early 2007 up till 2009, especially in 2008, more in fact a higher proportion of political elites felt that the government had adopted a more soft power approach in how it has responded to the crises in the Niger Delta. Though, it is worth noting that the Niger Delta inhabitants perceived the state to have used both hard and soft power approaches simultaneously, but relying more on the coercive strategy during this period. In the elite’s perception, the state reverted to the use of more coercive instruments in 2010, which later subsided from 2011 onward, a view that is in direct contrast with the Niger Delta inhabitants assessed. This supports Waever’s (2004) notion on the use of PS in analysing conflict situations, and subsequently justifies Balzacq’s (2011) criticism of the CS.

The findings demonstrate that what the state might describe as their security response to the Niger Delta oil conflict, does not always correspond with their actual practices. Therefore, justifying the researcher’s argument that the speech act theory of securitisation as articulated by CS on its own, is not sufficient to provide a clear understanding of the state security strategy in the Niger Delta. In the case of the study, the political elites perceive the government’s security strategy to be less coercive, whereas the Niger Delta inhabitants through the state’s actual practices, perceive the state strategies to be coercive and high-handed. Further evidence shows in 2004, the
Niger Delta inhabitants perceived state response to be more coercive and hard natured, but the elites adjudged the response to be less coercive and more soft natured during this period. Also, in 2008, the elites felt more soft power means were adopted by the state in the delta in direct contrast to Niger Delta inhabitants who held the opposite view. This mixed picture was crucial in the study because what the Niger Delta inhabitants might term as state high-handedness through its security response is sometimes referred to as mere and necessary security intervention on the part of the state by the political elites. Such state act supports Gad and Petersen description of securitisation and therefore gives credence to those scholars such as Emuedo (2012), Chiluwa (2011) and Frynas (2001) who have previously tried to analyse the Niger Delta oil conflict situation from a securitisation perceptive.

Bhonsle (2004:81) mentioned how the referent object of security has shifted to individuals and state actors, and Oshita (2007) emphasized the importance of the role of these state actors in conflict management. The above study shows that the political elite through their securitisation move remains visible as the driver of the Niger Delta oil conflict. While the elite renge to guarantee the human security of its citizenry, it continues to dominate by manipulating the dialectic of national security to its own advantage. The study also supports the notion of a linkage between elite and national (in)security articulated by Nwikpo (2013) and Olonisakin (2008). As shown in Figures 1 and 2, it is the continuous securitisation of the oil producing region that provided the basis for youth militancy and the extant criminalities described by Emuedo (2012), and other scholars such as Owugah (2010); who alleged that the successive militarisation of the oil zone delegitimised the initial non-violent protest strategy of the oil minorities as an effective approach. Nwikpo (2013) summed it up in her response to the researcher’s question:

“… When securitisation and underdevelopment in the Niger Delta as elsewhere in Nigeria is put into perspective, violent action through militancy can be expected as a last resort”.

Therefore, it is the level of securitisation in the oil delta that has led to the persistence of the conflict and the proliferation of militia groups. This corroborates Emuedo (2012) argument that it is the actions of the state political elite that has escalated the conflict. Hence, the elites in itself has become a source of conflict. Whatever position one might adopt, the fact is that the securitisation move on the part of the state have assumed a circular and reinforcing character. Every participating actor both state and non-state now confronts violence with violence. This process has led to further insecurity and consequently, has severe negative implications for the development of the oil region, which will ultimately lead to more resistance. Until the state security decision-makers in Nigeria realise that the struggle to have a secured environment and adequate social protection cannot be overruled with military power, then militancy as a means to an end might have come to stay in the delta region and elsewhere in the state.

5. CONCLUSION

A critical issue that has underpinned the study is what has transformed and led to the persistence of the Niger Delta oil conflict. Despite various factors that have been adduced as causes of the conflict, stemming from the historical to the political, from the economic to the environment, the state securitisation of the region has attracted attention as the main escalating factor. While there has been many debates about the
securitisation of the Niger Delta conflict, this article has re-assessed the conflict situation and put it into the context of securitisation theory. In doing so, it has substantiated the main arguments of the Paris School strand of securitisation theory which maintains that securitisation theorised solely on discourse analysis is not sufficient to give a comprehensive understanding of the state security strategy in certain regions. It asserts that consideration should also be given to the actual security practices of the state and its security apparatus in the conflict zones (Bigo, 2001; Bourdieu, 1998:83-84).

The findings from the study revealed a mixture of state security strategies using hard and soft power at different point in time over the 12 years studied period. However, the perception of the political elites of state security strategies in the volatile oil region over the 12 years period, differs from the actual state security practices as perceived by the Niger Delta inhabitants. The consequence of the state securitisation of the Niger Delta is the contemporary militancy and other form of criminalities which are still on-going. This has made national security to become a contested issue between the state and its citizenry. The article demonstrated that the Niger Delta oil conflict can be analysed from a securitisation perspective. The findings also showed that by examining state security practices, one can clearly establish the state security strategy. Subsequently, exposing the weakness of the Copenhagen School speech act theory of securitisation, which lay so much emphasis on the utterances of securitisation actors at the detriment of other important factors such as security perceptions and actual security practices of state actors. This neglect of actual security practice is a major theoretical gap within the Copenhagen School that underestimates how practice can precede or supersede public discourse in the security scheming of state actors, especially in sub-Saharan Africa.

Also, by analysing the perception of the political elites on the state security strategy alongside the perception of the Niger Delta inhabitants on the actual security practices of the state; the study has demonstrated that the state strategic response to the Niger Delta oil conflict is both a product of security discourses and practices. Therefore the two strands of the securitisation theory - the Paris School and the Copenhagen School, are not methodologically incompatible, and can both be applied when analysing the Niger Delta oil conflict.

REFERENCES


