

Capitalist and Neo-imperialist Politics: A Critique of Neoliberal Reconfigurations in Ogaga Ifowodo's *The Oil Lamp*

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Abstract

Neoliberalism and ecological imperialism are modern ways through which capitalist imperial powers continue to dominate formerly colonised people, and literature, being a mirror of society and a weapon in the hands of the writer, is used to portray and reconfigure modern imperialist ethos otherwise unknown to the public, and a copious example of such literature is the Niger Delta Literature. Ecocritical inquiries abound in Niger Delta Literature; however, many of these studies focus on issues such as exploitation, poverty, pollution, displacement, violence and survival, without necessarily and directly examining the neoliberal, capitalist and imperialist tendencies in the Niger Delta Literature, especially the poetry genre. Therefore, this paper is designed to fill this research gap and deepen our understanding of Ifowodo's engagement with capitalist and imperialist concerns in the Niger Delta by offering new insights into Ogaga Ifowodo's poetry. Relying on capitalist and Marxist ethos, this paper highlights the tenets of neoliberalism and capitalism, ecological imperialism, and its attendant resistance and protest culture in Ifowodo's *Oil Lamp*, thereby shedding new insights into Ifowodo's poetic evocation.

Keywords: Neoliberalism, Imperialism, Niger Delta Literature, Ifowodo's Poetic Evocation

Introduction

The Great Depression that ravaged Europe and America in the 1930s ushered in an era of economic downturn marked by high unemployment and penury. The depression was strongly attributed by many to economic liberalism failure – liberalism is an economic policy which arose from feudalism and mercantilism; it is a political and economic ideology that, according to Ian Adams in *Political Ideology Today* (2001), “supports a market economy based on individualism and private property in the means of production” (20). Neoliberalism terminology emerged as an attempt to repair the damage that liberalism wrought on the world's economy.

Philip Mirowski (2014) and Angus Burgin (2012) submit that a group of twenty-five intellectuals and journalists: Walter Lippmann, Friedrich Hayek, Ludwig von Mises, Wilhelm Röpke, Alexander Rüstow, and Louis Rougier, to name a few, organised the Walter Lippmann Colloquium, named in honor of Lippman to celebrate the publication of the French translation of Lippmann's pro-market book *An Inquiry into the Principles of the Good Society*. The aim of the colloquium (in 1938), according to Dieter Plehwe (2009:13), was to “construct a new liberalism as a rejection of collectivism, socialism and *laissez-faire* liberalism” and that it was the German sociologist and economist Alexander Rüstow who coined the term neoliberalism to refer to the rejection of the old *laissez-faire* liberalism. However, Alexander Rüstow was not the first to use that term. It was Charles Gide in his article, “Has Co-operation Introduced a New Principle into Economics?” (1898), who used it first in English and was later borrowed by Alexander Rüstow and later on by the classical liberal economist, Milton Friedman in his “Neo-Liberalism and its Prospects” (1951) essay, to describe a set of fundamental economic ideology.

One dominant proposition among neoliberals, in the words of Ekanede (2014:6) is that the market as a “self-regulating mechanism tending towards equilibrium of supply and demand, thus securing the most efficient allocation of resources ... so that any constraint on free competition would interfere

with the natural efficiency of market mechanisms, inevitably leading to social stagnation, political corruption, and the creation of unresponsive state bureaucracies". What was needed, therefore, was to establish an elite structure of individuals who would take over power in society and replace the existing democratic representatives acting on behalf of the majority of the people (Hayek, Friedrich (1976). By elite structure, it means "the notion that individuals who form an elite—a select group of people perceived as having an intrinsic quality, high intellect, wealth, power, notability, special skills, or experience—are more likely to be constructive to society as a whole, and therefore deserve influence or authority. To be a neoliberal, according to Dieter Plehwe (2009:13), "meant advocating a modern economic policy with state intervention." However, not all scholars agree on what neoliberalism is, which led to a serious clash among scholars in the 1950s and 1960s.

Furthermore, as indicated in Taylor C. Boas and Gans-Morse, Jordan's "Neoliberalism: From New Liberal Philosophy to Anti-Liberal Slogan" (2009:149-50),

During the military rule of Augusto Pinochet (1973–1990) in Chile, opposition scholars adopted the term to describe the economic reforms implemented there and their proponents (the Chicago Boys). Once this new meaning was established among Spanish-speaking scholars, it diffused into the English-language study of political economy. According to one study of 148 scholarly articles, neoliberalism is rarely defined but used in several senses to describe ideology, economic theory, development theory, or economic reform policy. It has become used largely as a term of abuse and/or to imply a *laissez-faire* market fundamentalism virtually identical to that of classical liberalism – rather than the ideas of those who attended the 1938 colloquium.

As a result, there is controversy over the term's precise meaning and its usefulness as a descriptor in the social sciences, especially as the number of market economies has proliferated in recent years. However, the basic assumptions by many scholars on the subject of neoliberalism are that neoliberalism is all about economic liberalisation policies, which include "privatisation, deregulation, globalisation, free trade, monetarism, austerity, and reductions in government spending in order to increase the role of the private sector in the economy and society" (N. Goldstein, 2011, p. 30).

In addition, Femi Aborisade (2010:39) opines, "the basic idea of neoliberalism is that free market economies will operate smoothly and steadily produce more wealth. Any problems that may arise are attributed to 'unnatural monopolies'" According to the neoliberal position, state economic intervention is an aberration that leads to economic distortions. What this means is that the state has nothing to do with the market system; the best it can do is to protect private property, uphold contracts, defend the national interest, and control the money supply. Therefore, from a neoliberal perspective, public enterprises or government involvement in economic activities is anti-economic development. For that, Neoliberals, according to Harvey (2005), advocate the privatisation of government-owned enterprises and the promotion of the private sector, and oppose state intervention in the economy through subsidies.

Neoliberalism and Its Economic Implications in Nigeria

Studies such as Aborisade (2010), Ekanade (2014), and Waller (2022), among others, show that the implementation of neoliberal policies in developing countries has been rather appalling. Instead of improving their economies, neoliberalism has led to economic stagnation, as evidenced by Nigeria. Prior to the adoption of neoliberal policies in 1999, Nigeria had implemented SAP (Structural Adjustment Program) in 1986 under General Ibrahim Babangida, between 1986 and 1990s Nigeria

had drifted away from a relative welfare state to adhoc welfare state which catered for the social needs of her people until when neoliberal policies were adopted in 1999 which shifted Nigeria totally from a welfare state to free market economy which made Nigeria a dump site for foreign countries (Ekanade, 2014). Reasons for the colossal failure of neoliberalism in Nigeria and many other African States are attributed to the fact that as at the time of neoliberal policies adoption, many African States including Nigeria had not gain economic autonomy and had not risen above challenges of good leadership and had not established as coequal within global communities, but as subordinate units subservient to international organisations policies and imposition of programs such as the World Bank SAP (Ekanade, 2014; Aborisade, 2010; Waller, 2022; Ekanade, 2014). Thus, Nigeria, as a subservient state, unwittingly accepted World Bank SAP policies grounded in neoliberalism without its people's consent, resulting in a massive decline in Nigerians' living standards.

Prior to SAP, Nigeria experienced unprecedented economic growth during the 1970s oil boom. At this time, Nigeria was practicing a welfare-state economy in which the state provided for its people's livelihoods. There was a massive reconstruction of infrastructure networks, education, healthcare, and other public infrastructure, which were extremely well developed, along with an extremely high employment rate. The government subsidised food and every other social amenity; imports were handled by the Nigerian National Shipping Line, which was under the Nigerian National Supply Commission. Moreover, Nigeria became the America of the world; foreigners were trooping in, and the naira was equivalent to the dollar. However, all these were stopped when SAP was introduced in 1986.

However, the introduction of SAP was not out of place. Part of the reason for adopting SAP was the decline in oil prices; export revenue fell by 53% between 1980 and 1982, from US\$27.1 billion to US\$12.7 billion. Internal public debt also increased by 72% over this period, due to government expenditure, part of which was on subsidies, from US\$8.5 billion in 1979 to \$26.9 billion in 1983, while external debt was estimated at \$14.13 billion. The politicians' disposition towards corruption and money flight did not help matters. This also affected the industrial sector, leading to the layoff of thousands of workers. It became obvious that a welfarist state was no longer sustainable; hence, the adoption of the Structural Adjustment Programme to reduce government expenditures, sponsored by the Bretton Woods institutions (Ekanade 2014; Aborisade 2010; Waller 2022).

To stabilise the economy, the Shagari administration sought a loan from the IMF (International Monetary Fund). However, the condition given to them was that Nigeria must adopt privatisation, reduce government expenditures, and introduce liberalisation and a sales tax. Shagari was reluctant until he was overthrown by Muhammadu Buhari in 1983. However, Buhari's intervention did not help matters, as he did not agree to the conditions except for the IMF's condition on commercialisation. So many Western banks decided to boycott Nigeria, and Buhari imposed severe restrictions on importation as part of austerity measures and cost-cutting to stabilise the economy. As a result, many industries were unable to import essential production materials, and many closed due to a lack of access to raw materials. "All of these actions were accompanied by high inflation. The price of basic food items rose, and life became increasingly difficult for the masses" (P. Lewis, 1996: p.82).

Over time, Babagida overthrew Buhari and fully adopted SAP in 1986, aiming to remedy the failing economy. However, Babagida turned out to be the worst of all. According to Ekenade (2014:12),

By 1993, the deficit Babangida had accumulated was put at N90-N100 billion. The annual budget for that year was N120 billion. One is left to wonder how a country that was adjusting could afford to amass a huge deficit year after year, especially after 1989. Thus, the SAP, rather than helping to revamp the economy, fed into the existing dynamic of decline, thereby becoming an integral factor in prolonging Nigeria's

economic crisis. Cumulatively, the SAP produced considerable hardship, poverty, and discontentment across the Nigerian society.

General Sani Abacha compounded Nigeria's economic crisis by widening the frontiers of neoliberalism. He opened Nigeria to total free trade and free importation by joining the World Trade Organization in 1994, which made Nigeria a dumping ground for all kinds of goods. The cheap goods imported from China rendered local industries useless, as they were unable to compete with the cheap, inferior goods, leading also to the death of the textile industry, which accounted for about 300,000 jobs in the country.

One thing to note is that neoliberalism does not regard people's social needs; rather, it is profit-oriented and promotes capitalism, putting the means of production in the hands of a few at the expense of the majority workforce. So, Nigerians were forced to accept these dominant neoliberal policies, which are typical of many African States. Nigerians' living standards dropped sharply after the State stopped subsidising basic commodities. To compound the issues, the democratic regime of Olusegun Obasanjo, which was supposed to cushion hardship in Nigeria, worsened the people's condition by wholeheartedly embracing neoliberal ideas between 1999 and 2007. Many of the state-owned enterprises were sold and privatised, and this led to the sacking of thousands of workers, thereby resulting in abject poverty, increasing unemployment and exclusion.

One of the many tragedies of neoliberalism, according to Ekanade (2014), is that in its "bid to promote the forces of the market and long-term interests of the private capitalist class, systematic assaults have been launched on the African and Latin American states' welfare, social, and public expenditure programmes, which have in turn resulted in backlash". The privatisation impoverished millions and enriched a few, among them Bola Ahmed Tinubu and Atiku Abubakar, who became extremely rich overnight. These people acquired public enterprises at no cost. According to Ekanade (2014: 15)

The Delta Steel was valued by BPE at N225 billion but was sold for a paltry N 4.5 billion; the Aluminum Smelting Company of Nigeria, built at the cost of \$3.2 billion, was sold to Russal, a Russian firm, at the cost of \$250 million. Only \$130 million of the said \$250 million has been paid, leaving a balance of \$120 million. In his last days in office, President Obasanjo sold the Kaduna and Port Harcourt refineries, valued at \$800 billion, in May 2007 for a paltry \$500 million to Blue Star Oil Service Limited, a consortium close to him. In addition, Eleme Petrochemicals Plant in Port Harcourt, the largest of its kind in Africa, was sold for \$225 million, an amount not even worth its spare parts.

The literature above indicates that the need to revamp Nigeria's dying economy necessitated the adoption of neoliberal policies in Nigerian politics, driven by the misconception that whatever worked in Europe could be applied. Another point is that neoliberal policies are pro-capitalist, pro-exclusionist, pro-poverty and anti-people. According to Joseph Stiglitz, a renowned economist and Nobel Prize winner, cited in Ekanade (2014:17), "affirmed that neither theory nor economic evidence supports the claim that opening up your market can assure robust economic growth."

The ecological conditions of Nigerian society, particularly in the Niger Delta, have been at the centre of environmental scholarship in recent years. *Aridon*, an international journal edited by Tanure Ojaide, G.G. Darah and Rose Aziza, is one of the journals devoted to environmental studies in the Niger Delta. Chinyere Nwahunaya's *From Boom to Boom: Protest and Conflict Resolution in the Literature of the Niger Delta* (2011) is a dialectical engagement with the Niger Delta environment. Ogaga Okuyade's *Ecocritical Literature: Regreening African Landscapes* (2013) critically examines the representations, constructions, and imaginings of the relationship between the human and non-

human worlds in contemporary African literature and culture. The book of essays by various scholars offers innovative, incisive, and critical perspectives on the importance of sustaining a symbiotic relationship between humans and their environment. One important achievement of this book is that it carries African scholarship beyond mere analysis of themes and style to the ethical and activist roles of literature, geared towards rectifying the ecological imbalance prevalent in many parts of the African continent. The thrust of the eighteen essays in the book is the restoration of harmony between man and his environment. However, none of the eighteen essays examine the concept of ecological imperialism and neoliberalism.

Furthermore, Nwagbara (2010) examines the poetics of violence in the poetry of the Niger Delta with particular reference to Tanure Ojaide's *Delta Blues & Home Songs* and *Day Dream of Ants and Other Poems*. The core thesis in Nwagbara's study of Niger Delta poetry is that Nigerian poets, especially those from the Niger Delta region, are concerned with the Niger Delta people's struggle against capitalist tendencies and their survival amid diverse ecological problems in their region. Nwagbara's study neglects ecological imperialist concerns and neoliberalism in its engagement with environmental literature.

In another study, Nesther and Yusuf (2012) examine the preoccupation of Niger Delta poets with the politics of land in the region and note that oil exploration in Nigeria has not only destroyed the natives' physical environment but also their spiritual world. Nesther and Yusuf (2012), like Nwagbara (2010), foreground the fact that the people of the Niger Delta have resorted to both violent and non-violent protests to address their problems in recent years. Critics argue that the works of the Niger Delta poets paint a picture of a decaying, violent landscape that epitomises the struggle between the people (including militants), private explorers, and the Nigerian government.

The above ecocritical studies undoubtedly contributed to the ecological scholarship on the Niger Delta canon of Nigerian literature. The scholars mainly focused on such issues as exploitation, poverty, pollution, displacement, violence and survival, without necessarily and directly examining the imperialist and neoliberal tendencies in the Nigerian eco-poetry. Therefore, this study is designed to fill this research gap and deepen our understanding of Ifowodo's engagement with neoliberal and imperialist concerns in the Niger Delta, offering insights into Ifowodo's poetry.

Neoliberalism and Capitalism: Rethinking Ogaga Ifowodo's *The Oil Lamp*

Studies on neoliberalism underscore that it is capitalism in disguise (Ekanade, 2014; Aborisade, 2010; Waller, 2022). Hyman (1975: 96-97) makes us to understand that capitalism comprises of a complex production and social relations, and the structure of a capitalist system consist: private ownership of the means of production by minority; the obligation of the majority of society to sell their labour power as a commodity; the domination of profit as the fundamental motive of economic activity; and top-down hierarchical control over production processes by owners and their managerial representatives. This capitalist structure amounts to exploitation, as the majority of the workforce receive wages and salaries that are not equal or proportionate to the value of their collective labour, while the owner of the means of production profits from it; this creates a conflict of interest. The working class does not have a say in the production process of the commodity or in the distribution of profit along the value chain, which constitutes alienation.

From a Marxist perspective, this situation is constantly bedevilled by antagonism from both sides, defined by economic status: the ruling class (capitalists) and the working class (workers). Capitalists own and/or control the means of production, distribution, consumption and exchange, as well as the means of political domination. The workers, on the other hand, are the subordinate class who neither own nor control significant property, but are subjected to the servitude of the interests of the ruling class, and are thereby politically, economically, and socially exploited and dominated (Aborisade, 2010).

According to Bukharin (2003), the reason why the capitalist structure is exploitative and conflictual is that the system is therefore violent; any system hinged on the exploitation of the overwhelming majority by a select few can only survive by repressing the other class violently, and such a system can only bring societal chaos, turbulence and war. For Bukharin, a neoliberal system, that is, capitalism, is unrealisable without arms and wars. Citing (IST in (Africa 22), Bukharin says that “war is nothing but another method of competition at a specific level of development, and conflictual economic interests give rise to the inevitability of the existence of arms and wars. Elsewhere, Caffentzis (2005: 121), in consonance with Bukharin, argues that “capitalism is essentially war-like, both between and within classes, such that wars can be identified as profit, wage, interest or rent wars. Hence, the Marxist contention that war is the continuation of economics by other means, and the oil and gas sector in Nigeria is no exception.

According to Aborisade (2010:34),” the oil and gas operations appear to be organised in a war-like scenario as oil facilities are defended and secured by a combination of foreign, state and private security outfits. Staff housing estates of foreign oil companies as well as oil facilities tend to be located within paramilitary estates, with police and military posts providing security (International Crisis Group, 2000, 2002)”. Aborisade buttresses his argument by citing Watts (2004:15) who states that “by the late 1990s, an estimated 20 per cent of Shell’s workforce in Nigeria was categorised as ‘security’.

The Nigerian state has unleashed terror on the people of the Niger Delta through operations such as Operation Salvage and Operation Flush, conducted by various military task forces, including the Rivers State Task Force and the Joint Task Force. These operations have included the use of the mobile police called ‘kill and go’, the regular police, the notorious State Security Service (SSS), and the Directorate of Military Intelligence (DMI). Communal conflicts are often engineered to justify increased military presence in the Niger Delta. In all these operations, the oil multinationals bankroll the Nigerian state’s procurement of weapons of terror (Aborisade, 2010), as reflected in many of the military operations in Ifowodo’s *The Oil Lamp*.

The petro-capitalism sector is the most crucial example of neoliberalism and environmental imperialism in Nigeria, in which multinational oil and gas companies invest and trade freely, and on which Nigeria’s economy is grounded. A petro-capitalist economy exhibits all the features of capitalism mentioned above. As such, to adequately understand such an economy, One would need to grasp the key elements Caffentzis (2005) highlights.

Caffentzis (2005) argues that the Petro-Capitalist economy first produces oil as a commodity to make a profit rather than to ensure human welfare. The idea is that if profit cannot be derived from oil sales, then it is not worth the effort and therefore it should not be produced. Secondly, oil is a basic commodity because it is involved in the production of all other commodities, so that when the cost of oil production rises, it rises exponentially: it is expected that the production of other commodities which rely heavily on oil will automatically rise as well as implications on wages and salaries at both local and international levels. Thirdly, the process of producing oil involves a high organic composition of capital, meaning that it embraces large amounts of machines and equipment and relatively little direct labour, with all the consequent implications and contradictions. The attendant contradiction stems from the fact that although oil accounts for 90% of the wealth of oil-producing nations like Nigeria, it provides very little employment compared to other sectors of the capitalist system. According to Fajana (2010), the Nigerian oil sector provides about 70,000 jobs for all categories of workers. The question it raises, therefore, is: where does the surplus value derived from the unpaid labour of the working class come from, since the industry employs limited labour? Caffentzis answers: “It comes from other sectors of the economy with lower organic composition of capital”. Put simply, “the bulk of the surplus is generated by the industries with the most labour, while the bulk of the surplus is appropriated by the industries with the most capital” Caffentzis

(2005: 123), so that the “resources are continually channelled to the relatively more capital-intensive oil and gas sector that has limited direct linkages with the rest of the economy” (African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM), 2008: 143).

This is the reason the oil industry is often considered a matter of concern for ‘collective capital’. According to Aborisade (2010:36), “The capitalists are, therefore, concerned with controlling where the surplus that is shifted to the oil industry is going. Is it being used for the welfare of the working class or the benefit of the capitalists? Further, rent is paid to the owners of the oil fields – a kind of tribute to the owners of the land where oil is found. In Nigeria, it manifests as 13% derivation, which is considered as rent payable to oil-producing communities for the use of land. This kind of contradiction in the oil and gas sector leads to war; as Caffentzis (2005:102) says, “war tends to accompany all rental claims, and occurs because rent is considered to be the epitome of unproductive income”. It is, therefore, argued that if the owner of the oil field disrupts the productive activity of a profitable industry, the latter could lay claim to the right of exclusion and resist being disturbed (Aborisade, 2010). It is such resistance that Ifowodo speaks of in *The Oil Lamp*, a reminiscence in the poems Odi, Ogoni, The Pipes War, and Cesspit of the Niger Delta. In all of these poems written in sequence order, the reader is exposed to the contradictions created by neoliberal capitalist structures fuelled by collective capital and rental claims.

Such conflicts, as reflected in "Odi", "Ogoni" and "The Pipes War", must be understood in relation to the collective interests of capitalists, nation-states, imperial powers, and multinational oil companies worldwide. All around the world, they play a crucial role, as oil is bound to them all. That is why scholars such as Bond (2006:34) argue that oil alone does not cause conflicts. Rather, it is “the process of oil transformation and mediation through market, social and power relations in various forms as energy, profit and power that causes conflicts”.

Capitalist contradictions in the oil and gas sector of the economy give rise to five types of class struggle, according to Nore and Turner (1980). The first and main source of contradiction, according to Nore and Turner, is the oil produced and marketed within capitalist/ruling-class terms and relations.

The second and most direct form of class struggle around oil is the confrontation between capital and oil workers within the industry. The third form of class struggle takes place among factions and classes for control of state power in oil-producing countries. The fourth, and most fundamental, is the class struggle between the exploited and the ruling classes in oil-producing countries. This includes conflicts between workers and oil companies, as well as between workers and the state. The fifth is the conflict among different elements of the international bourgeoisie, each based in a major industrial power.

It is the fourth type of class struggle that is fundamental to our discourse here, and it is explained further by Caffentzis (2005:3-5) that this form of oil-related conflict is between

the resource owners (for example, oil producing communities, who lay claim to ownership and the right to control) and the tenants (for example private or state-owned oil companies); the struggle between non-state land owners and the state over the level of taxation that is to be levied on the rental income; and the struggle between central state-land owners and different class elements over the level of rents received and their social distribution in terms of wage levels and sharing formula to other lower levels of government.

Thus, the contradiction in the neoliberal capitalist structure in the oil sector exists predominantly in the forms of class struggles - conflicts over ownership, between the oil-producing communities and the state. Ownership tends to determine who has the right to control, manifesting in resource control. So that the Niger Delta people in the Nigerian situation claim the mineral resources, especially crude oil deposits, in their territories, as a result, the Ijaw ethnic group, declared in the Kiama Declaration, that the petroleum within Ijaw territory is common property of the Ijaw community:

1. All land and natural resources (including mineral resources) within the Ijaw territory belong to Ijaw communities and are the basis of our survival.
2. We cease to recognise all undemocratic decrees that rob our people's communities of the right to ownership and control of our lives and resources, which were enacted without our participation and consent. These include the Land Use Decree and the Petroleum Decree (The Kiama Declaration, December 1998
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kiama_Declaration#cite_note-1)

The Kiama Declaration was issued by the Ijaw Youth Council (IYC) of Nigeria on December 11 December 11 1998 to attribute the political crisis in Nigeria to the struggle for the control of oil mineral resources, while asserting that the degradation of the environment of Ijaw land by transnational oil companies and the Nigerian State arise mainly because Ijaw people have been robbed of their natural rights to ownership and control of their land and resources. The council was formed in the town of Kiama after 5,000 Ijaw people representing over 40 Ijaw clans chose to articulate their aspirations for the Ijaw people and to demand an end to 40 years of environmental damage and underdevelopment in the region.

The Kiama Declaration represents the communiqué of the conference held by the youths of the Ijaw ethnic group on December 11, 1998. Based on the perspective of community ownership of oil, militant groups argue that it is legitimate for them to take oil from the pipelines erected by the oil companies. Furthermore, there exist unregistered private oil refineries suspected to have been constructed by militant armed groups. On the other hand, by virtue of the legislation enacted by the state, the act of taking oil from the pipelines and constructing unlicensed refineries is considered illegitimate and criminal, as far as the state is concerned.

The contradiction regarding land ownership is highlighted in some of the poems under the "Ogoni" heading in Ifowodo's *The Oil Lamp*. One of the invading soldiers decides to engage the local people to bring them to reason; the response he receives highlights the dichotomy that exists between the indigenous people and the government. The persona asks the following questions, followed by their replies:

Do you really believe you own the oil?
Yes, they said...
And how did you come to own it?...
By its being on our land, they said.
The land is Nigeria's, I corrected them.

The dialogue sets the stage for who owns the oil rights. The soldier's perspective is that, because the community is part of Nigeria and the land on which the oil is extracted is within Nigeria's territory, the oil belongs to Nigeria; hence the supposed correction: 'the land is Nigeria's'. In response to the presupposed soldiers' correction, an old man in the community retorts thus:

And how did Nigeria come to own the oil?...
By its being on her land...

And what treason! What outrage! He said:
Can you tell me, my son, how old Nigeria is?
Born in 1914, she's seventy-nine this year, I said
And he: "That's Lord Lugard's colony, the cartographer's
trade map for British expropriation. But I will take your word for it,
So tell me, my son, how long do you think we have been on this land,
How long the oil, the trees, the creeks and the rivers?"

In 1914, Southern Nigeria was joined with the Northern Nigeria Protectorate to form the single colony of Nigeria. The unification was done for economic reasons, and the colonial administration sought to use the budget surpluses in Southern Nigeria to offset this deficit. As such, the old man could say with confidence that the amalgamation was a "trade map for British expropriation – by expropriation, it means the act of transferring the property of another person to one's own. So in truth, Nigeria was born in 1914. So when the old man asks the soldier how long the indigenous people have been living on the land to make a claim to it, it becomes clear that Nigeria has no claim to the land or to whatever is therein.

The other part of the dialogue reveals a crucial factor that results in many of the conflicts in the Niger Delta, and this factor dwells in the answer the soldier gave to the old man:

By decrees and edicts duly made, the land is not yours

The soldier replies that, although young, Nigeria owns the land by decree and edict. The answer reminds us of the 1978 Land Use Decree. The decree vests all land in the urban areas of each state in the Military Governor (now State Governor) of that state, while rural lands are vested in the Local Governments exercising jurisdiction in the particular areas.

According to A.N. Allott (1978), this decree was one of the most revolutionary enactments in Nigerian law for many years. It was made on March 29, 1978, and is shown as commencing on that date by the Federal Military Government. It is revolutionary because it imposes for the first time on Nigeria a common and uniform system of land titles and land control. Before this date, Nigeria was divided into two distinct land law systems. On the one hand, according to Allott, there was the system in the northern States, the successors of the former Northern Regions, where the Land Tenure Law, 1962, was in force. This Law had replaced and largely re-enacted the Land and Native Rights Ordinance, 1916, which had confirmed for Northern Nigeria that there could be no absolute titles to, and held by natives or non-natives, that the title to all land was vested in the government, and that, at best, occupiers could hold rights of occupancy under the law. These rights were severely limited and controlled. Allot says this Law was exclusionary, as it was designed to protect the interests of the natives of the northern states, thereby legislating against Nigerians from other parts of the country and against foreigners. On this note, the Land Use Decree is widely contested. It is a system of land-grabbing that the government used to seize all land in the South in favour of the North.

One major case that is often contested, and which is also reflected in the poems, is the legitimacy of the decree. The native people were not consulted before the decree was issued, thanks to General Olusegun Obasanjo, who made the pronouncement without considering the interests of the Niger Delta, thereby making whatever lies in the land belong to the government, including the mineral wealth. So that when the soldier in the poem tells the old man, "the land is not yours nor all that lies in it," he is referring to the "powers that rule the country", the governmental power that robs the people of their land in favour of the rest of Nigeria.

It does not end there. The Land Use Decree was later superseded by the Petroleum Act of 1969, which vested ownership of petroleum resources in territorial waters and all onshore and offshore petroleum revenue in the Federal Government. Thus, the people were totally robbed. It is these kinds

of obnoxious policies that disenfranchise the people the Kiama Declaration was intended to target. The Kiama Declaration, contrary to the Land Use Decree and The Petroleum Act, says that “We (the Ijaw and their neighbours in the Niger Delta) cease to recognise all undemocratic decrees that rob our people's communities of the right to ownership and control of our lives and resources, which were enacted without our participation and consent. These include the Land Use Decree and the Petroleum Decree”. The Land Use Decree and the Petroleum Act of 1969 are in furtherance of European expropriation policies in Nigeria; as such, the Nigerian government is merely a stooge.

We have argued that the neoliberal system structure is faulty, because it encourages conflicts between two main classes – the working class and the ruling class, but, as for the Petro-capitalist system, the contradictions are manifold. It goes beyond the question of paid wages and salaries, which are insufficient, to the question of land, where production takes place. He who owns land owns the means of production. To exercise maximum control over production, the mega capitalist, the State, with the aid of its ideological state apparatus – the military, police, navy, etc. - enforces its might over the larger population workforce and the natives. Karl Max projects resistance that will ensue from the working class and the capitalists, through the State, unleashing terror on the people. In the Niger Delta, the state has unleashed terror numerous times through many operations such as Operation Salvage, Operation Flush of various military task forces, including the Rivers State Task Force and the Joint Task Force. These operations included the use of the mobile police called 'kill and go', the regular police, the notorious State Security Service (SSS), and the Directorate of Military Intelligence (DMI), and these operations are reflected in Ifowodo's *The Oil Lamp* and have led to the death of thousands of people in the Delta.

For example, the poem, “Ogoni,” portrays how the government, in collaboration with oil companies attempt to vanquish the people without remorse by constantly shooting and bombing them:

Shooting and bombing to keep them in the bush...
after fifteen nights and days in the bush...
At my word, big guns would go off.
but Shell shipped in caseloads of what we lacked”
(XL 48)

Where oil exploration and exploitation take place around the world, spills are bound to occur, but the attention given to the effects of oil spills and attempts to clean up the mess are what make the difference. The same multinational oil companies operate in other countries. However, when spills occur, they run to the site and clean them up immediately, unlike in Nigeria, where multinational oil companies conspire with the government to kill the people who protest against negligence on the part of the government and companies. The contrast between the management of oil spills in Nigeria and the United States is bemoaned, as Cajetan Iheka (2017:1) expresses dissatisfaction. I will cleave the indulgence of the reader to lift a whole paragraph to highlight the point fully.

...This was the 2010 BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. When this event occurred, I had been in the United States for a few months, having arrived from Nigeria in the fall of 2009 for graduate school. The BP spill was my introduction to the world of sensational, image-driven coverage by the American media. However, it was also a lesson in geopolitics, history, and narrative positioning—all subjects that fascinated me. More importantly, I was amazed by the reporting on the spill, the Obama administration's relatively swift response, and the fact that BP's then-CEO flew to the United States to take charge of the company's efforts to mitigate the aftermath of the disaster. All these were captivating because I had just arrived from a country where oil spills are a regular occurrence: the communities of the Niger Delta sit in a region despoiled by continuous environmental devastation since 1956, when oil was

discovered in commercial quantities. As I followed the disaster in America, the contrast with the Nigerian scenario, where oil companies and government at different levels ignore damage caused by frequent oil spills, gas flaring, and other forms of environmental degradation, became more glaring and disturbing.

A contrast that could be drawn between oil companies' response to oil spillage in Nigeria and the United States is that the oil companies do not regard Nigerians as humans, or they regard Nigeria as a colony. Their oil prospecting is an extension of colonialism, hence the utter neglect of environmental damage in Nigeria. As a matter of fact, according to Adelabu and Ayomide (2023: 88), "the oil companies even sponsor military operations to repress the people's will and efforts at safeguarding the environment that the oil companies are destroying" as seen in the poem, corroborating the view: petro-capitalist system is not human oriented however liberal it is, but rather profit oriented and they benefit more when the people are divided. Reflecting on this strategy, the poet says,

Money-on-the-barrel to the oil cartel for containment
strategies when the natives get restive

As a result, the oppressed people have no other choice than to resist violently, echoing Frantz Fanon's (2001) injunction that colonialism is a violent phenomenon that should be resisted with equal violent force. At first, as highlighted in the poem, four soldiers were killed in the resistance, and in response, Major Kitemo says:

Kill-Them-All, not so? Well, you'd better run!
I will wipe out every damn one of you, if I must,
Guns and grenades yelled at my new name for fifteen days.
I drove them all into the bush, sent the rowing into
the creeks with fireflies as their light. Then we dug in to hold the town,
shooting to keep them in the bush... (XXXIX)

The poet makes us to understand that the natives resisted the military operation for weeks despite the military's superior weapons; it was not until they exhausted their ammo that the people later surrendered:

I'd waited for the surrender; we took them in and kept shelling...
They came out among a crowd and fell on their knees:
Please, please, we will do what you say, anything you want.
But stop the shelling. Please! Please!

The natives' experiences of the violent resistance are dismal: Three have died of snakebites, four of malaria/ Two women have given birth under trees. Five elders' hearts expired with the last bomb. Our stomachs are raw with roots... (Ogoni XL). Moreover, prior to the violent resistance, Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight others had organised a peaceful protest against environmental degradation carried out by the government. They were falsely accused of killing some elders in the area. For this, they were murdered on the order of General Sani Abacha, and this is reflected in the poem thus:

The hanged nine for murders pre-planned and for Colonel Kitemo

The nine persons that were hanged are: Ken Saro-Wiwa (the leader), Saturday Dobee, Nordu Eawo, Daniel Gbooko, Paul Levera, Felix Nuata, Baribor Bera, Barinem Kiobel and John Kpuine. The poet uses the word "pre-planned" to mean that the killing of these environmental activists was planned using false allegations. This became true as two of the witnesses who testified for Saro-Wiwa's involvement in the murder of the Ogoni elders later recanted the testimony, stating that they (the false witnesses) had been bribed with money and offers of jobs with Shell to give false testimony – in the presence of Shell's lawyer, and this is captured in the poem thus:

for all too weak to be right

too few for a moment's doubt
in the mind of the well-paid hand... (XLI)

The death of the nine activists did not end with hanging. The poet makes us understand that after their death, acid was poured onto the bodies to erase them from the surface of the earth:

Broken verses, wept far from the hidden pit,
where they flung the famous nine,
after the undertaker's conjuration acid (which as we heard,
was to erase their bones, wipe out every trace of a deed
too foul to stay under the ground) have dinned the air,
etched the proof on every soil.

It was this painful experience that led to the violent resistance that the poet talks about – all for the oil wealth of the Niger Delta. According to reports, thousands of Ogoni people were killed, raped, beaten, detained, or exiled. However, the poet mentions one thousand as an official record; it is an understatement of the havoc wreaked on Ogoni. Niger Deltans have always been known as peaceful people, and protests were staged peacefully until the death of the “famous nine,” to borrow a leaf from Ifowodo.

Ken Saro-Wiwa had predicted this shift in the methodology of resistance, from peaceful to violent, in his 1995 pre-conviction statement to the Ogoni Civil Disturbances Tribunal. The shift from non-violent to violent forms of resistance, however, is not entirely new. On February 23, 1966, Isaac Jasper Adaka Boro, an Ijaw nationalist, along with a few other youths, organised an armed struggle. It declared the Niger Delta Republic an autonomous region that lasted only 12 days (Obarisade, 2010). The point that is being made here is that all the violence that took place or taking place in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria as reflected in *The Oil Lamp* is as a result of the Neoliberal policies promoted in Nigeria, in real sense, is neo-colonialism, and it is a violent one; and since this neo-colonialism is a violent phenomenon it has to be resisted with equal violent force hence the social unrest in the Niger Delta. The kernel of the resistance is that if the natives cannot benefit from the oil, then it should not be extracted.

The contradiction between oil-producing communities and oil companies seems endless. Rutledge (2005:3-4) captures two significant features of petro-capitalism that differ from those of manufacturing capitalism: the need for landed property and the territorial imperative. As Obarisade (2010) explains, "Oil capitalism necessarily requires having access to landed property in order to drill for oil. This means the oil company must comply with customary rules and arrangements governing access to land and mineral rights, including oil. Obarisade explains further that the state has historically retained the right to land, including mineral rights. Under the current Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (1999), the government owns the land, including the minerals embedded in it. The State could lease land to individuals or corporate bodies for various uses for a specified duration. As such, the State owns land in trust for the people of Nigeria. The State is thus constitutionally empowered to grant licenses for the use of the land, revoke the licenses granted, tax or demand some contribution in kind, and generally exercise the power to regulate the industry. Oil capitalism is distinct from capitalism based on agriculture or manufacturing because of its 'territorial imperative'. The oil company must continuously shift its operations from region to region and country to country, constantly seeking new oil reserves to replace those already depleted. If it fails to replace the depleted reserves, its share price will decline, and its directors and shareholders will suffer.

These features of petro-capitalism imply that oil capitalism intrinsically and continuously fuels contradictions and conflict. It puts the oil company in conflict with oil-producing communities as it

continues to shift land and prospect for more oil reserves, potentially with the state, whenever the latter feels its sovereignty is seriously challenged. These conflicts are in addition to the inherent conflict between oil companies and their workforce, which is the reality for capitalist companies operating in neoliberal economies.

Community Struggles in Oil Capitalism is another dimension of the contradictions of neoliberal capital. Oil-producing communities clamour for resource control, environmental protection, infrastructure provision, and access to jobs for youth, among other demands, in exchange for granting access to land and oil drilling. According to Obarisase (2010), since the 1950s, minority ethnic groups in the Niger Delta have been agitating against marginalisation, neglect and politics of exclusion by the three main majority ethnic-based ruling political parties and governments in Nigeria: the Hausa/Fulani in the Northern Region; the Yoruba in the Western Region; and the Igbo in the Eastern Region. The minority ethnic groups then agitated for the creation of separate regions, which was not approved. In an attempt to address the challenges of marginalisation, the Federal Government established the Willinks Commission. The Commission rejected the demand for separate regions, preferring to provide constitutional guarantees against neglect in the form of fundamental rights. The Commission also recommended the establishment of a Niger Delta Development Board to address developmental concerns in the area, which began operations in 1959.

However, the justification of Resource Control may be appreciated only if it is located within the praxis of the needs of the people, when we realise that although the region produces 90% of the State's revenue, it is the least developed in all the regions of the State, coupled with the devastation that the oil drilling inflicts on the people. Among the devastations is the fire outbreak in Jese, which the poem "Jese" captures in the poetry collection. The poetic rendition entitled "Jese" is not mere fiction; the proper stuff for the imagination was what happened some years back, thousands of people were roasted. According to the poet, the fire coiled like an infinite cobra/ stretched to the farthest edges of a land marked by a double torment/ the creeks, the pond, soon to boil dry/ the land burned, the trees burned, the rivers burned/ the smoke unrolled endless bolts of cloth to wrap naked grief and shield the world from the horrors of the flame. All the Head of State could say on visiting the area was that, when asked whether the victims would be compensated, he replied: "No. We must not encourage thieves and saboteurs" (Jese XI-XIII).

The Niger Delta people, who bear the brunt of Nigeria's revenue, are the least developed. The destruction of forests and farmlands destroys their main occupations, the pollution of creeks and fishponds by oil spills, and the contamination of the air by gas flaring, which causes acidic rainwater. However, basic amenities such as health care, piped water, and electricity are lacking. On this note, they clamour for restructuring so that each region can manage its own resources, as they are marginalised.

The distribution of revenue by source is termed the 'derivation' principle in Nigeria. The historical ambience that led to this development dates back to 1953, when Nigeria was still practicing regionalism. The regional government of the area where natural resources were found had 100 per cent control and merely had to contribute to fund the central government. The percentage of the revenue from natural resources which the regional governments (and later state governments) could retain, according to Oborisode (2010:13), "was reduced to 50% by 1960; 45% in 1970; 20% in 1975; 2% in 1982; 1.5% in 1984; 3% in 1992 and rose to 13% by 1995 – the rate that is still retained in Section 162(2) of the operating constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (1999)". The ethnic minorities in the oil-rich Niger Delta now argue that their struggle is for self-determination and political autonomy within Nigeria. They reason that, whereas the majority ethnic nationalities of Nigeria sought to exercise the right to self-determination during anti-colonial struggles for independence, successive governments, backed by the majority ethnic nationalities, have denied

ethnic minorities the same right, which is itself a kind of imperialism too. The Niger Delta people are not only imperially denied at the level of revenue but also at the level of self-determination.

The clamouring manifests, according to Watts (2004: 24), in six forms of resistance: demonstrations and blockades against oil facilities, occupations of flow stations, sabotage of pipelines, oil bunkering, legal actions, hostages and strikes. He points out that the patterns and rhythms of the different forms of resistance were affected by local and national elections, the deepening militarisation of oil fields and installations, and the emergence of ethnic militias and armed groups. However, it must be acknowledged that these forms of resistance developed over time (Oborisode, 2010).

One important point to note here is that the violence is not only targeted at the government and multinational companies, but it is also targeted at oil-producing communities, which can be regarded as a communal crisis and an ethnic crisis. These crises occurred between and within groups over access to and control of oil. According to Ikelegbe (2005:220), “such conflicts have occurred between ethnic nationalities such as the Ijaw and Itsekiri; Ijaw and Ilaje; Urhobo and Itsekiri; and Basambri-Nembe and Ogbologbomabri-Nembe; and within communities such as Ozoro” (Ikelegbe, 2005, p. 220). While in Warri, Delta State, communal violence manifests as the conflict between the Ijaw and Itsekiri ethnic militias, in Rivers State, it is manifested as a conflict between Ijaw groups (Oborisode, 2010), and this is reflected in the poems in the following stanza:

...Rusted Shell could dig them up-
Into a war for territory between Oley and Olomoro:
with oil well and pipeline, without piped water,
(but also without tribal feuds) over ancestral lands or lakes);
they had shared peace and poverty till pipes too old for hot crude
called for heated blood in their hollows.
Oh, do not ask history's questions,
Know only that claims clash over rust, a youth from Oleh died and
Olomoro's equipped the spillage, and guns and machetes
leapt into hordes of hands, and there was a pretext
to shoot and burn and drive more into the bush (XLIV)

The poet makes us understand that the conflicts between communities over territorial claims are a pretext for the government and the oil companies to unleash mayhem, distract people, and set them apart, people who had been living in harmony before the discovery of oil. The conflicts usually erupt when oil companies decide to compensate host communities for damages incurred, something they are not used to doing, and knowing that sharing the money would lead to bloodshed, as happened in Oleh and Olomoro. Olomoro and Oleh are Isoko communities in Delta State – they regard one another as brothers and sisters and have always lived in harmony until oil money came on board, and many youths died as a result. A similar scenario occurred between Ogbodu and Oghior six years ago – both are Urhobo communities in Delta State, Nigeria. What one could discern in all of these is that imperial powers disguise themselves in the form of multinational oil companies to turn the natives against each other in order to plunder their resources. This is not the first time it has occurred; it occurred during the slave trade era and also during the colonial era, when multinational companies traded in palm oil in the Niger Delta and now crude oil – it is all about oil and neo imperialism consolidated by neoliberal policies of free trade and privatisation, which only enrich a few at the expense of the many.

Although many commissions have been formed to provide palliatives for the Niger Delta people: the Willinks Commission (1958); the Niger Delta Development Board (1959); the Niger Delta Development Board (1961); the Niger Delta Basin Development Authority (1976); the Presidential Task Force for Development of Oil Producing Areas (1989); the Oil Mineral Producing Areas

Development Commission (1992); the Niger Delta Development Commission (2000); the 50-member Consolidated Council on Social and Economic Development of Coastal States of the Niger Delta comprising the President as Chairman and Governors of all the oil producing states as members (2006); and the Ministry of Niger Delta (2008), Amnesty (2009), these commissions, according to Odukoya (2006: 256), are actually

anti-development in that they were set up to disempower the revolutionary consciousness of the people of the Niger Delta. In addition, they also serve as another avenue for primitive accumulation by members of the ruling class from the Niger Delta region who are appointed to such commissions. The Commissions and development agencies listed above are viewed as avenues for primitive accumulation in that they are often mired in corruption.

The commissions are anti-people, imperialist and unprogressive and a tip of the iceberg; the Nigerian government must realise sooner than later that neoliberalism is anti-human, until then Nigeria will continue to remain underdeveloped.

Conclusion

Ogaga Ifowodo's reconfiguration of neoliberal and imperialist ethos in *The Oil Lamp* strongly indicts the Nigerian government. It states beyond reasonable doubt that the Nigerian government in connivance with imperial powers suppress and impoverish her own people by grabbing their lands in the name of decrees, destroy their sources of livelihood through oil spillage without compensation and cleansing as against international standard; open their markets to all sorts of foreign cheap and low quality products thereby killing local markets and industry; give stipends to host communities to cause confusion and division in order to keep the natives at abeyance, from uniting as formidable force to resist their anti-human policies. The follies of government ownership of all lands are laid bare as Ifowodo poetically engages newly found country and government absurdist rights of ownership of land as against a thousand years old community rights of ownership of land and vesting all the rights of oil extraction from the lands in the hands of imperial multinational oil companies, thereby exposing the modern imperialist undertone and the status of a conquered people in the so-called Nigerian independent state. Ifowodo drops a cautionary note: until the Nigerian government realises, sooner rather than later, that neoliberalism is anti-human, Nigeria will remain underdeveloped.

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