

Industrial Capitalism and Forest Depletion in Eleme Local Government Area: The Socio-Economic Implications

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Abstract

This paper has argued that the depletion of the “forest land resources” in Eleme LGA and its attendant “biodiversity loss” resulted from federal government's industrial policy that resolves around the technologically advanced nations of Europe and America. Although the aim is to increase the revenue base of the nation, the involvement of multinational corporations in this resource explanation in the area introduced exploitative economic considerations in line with the global capitalism. This is because industrial capitalism places premium on profit maximization, private ownership of means of production, vision of labour and specialization of labour. This capitalist ethos encouraged exploitation and alienation in the course of social relations of production. Furthermore, environmental resources are commoditized and commercialized. The obvious implication is that emphasis is placed on maximal exploitation of environmental resources (in the case of forest land) rather than their maximal sustainability. This is the underlying relationship between industrial capitalism and forest land depletion in Eleme. This argument tallies with Luxemburg (1913) assertion that capitalist expanded production of capital involves the destruction of the pre-capital mode of production.

Keywords: *Industrial capitalism, Forest depletion*

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Background to the Study

The territory known as Eleme constitutes one local government out of the twenty-three that make up the Rivers State. It is located between longitudes 7° and 7° 15" East of the meridian and latitude 4° 60" and 4° 35" North of the equator (Ngofa, 2006). Eleme is strategically located within the radius of 30 kilometer from Port-Harcourt city. The people are naturally endowed with abundance of fertile agricultural land, hydrocarbon, gas, sea, rivers and creeks. The occupation of the people from ancient times has remained agriculture.

Before the contact with the Western capitalists, Eleme traditional society had very extensive forest resources that were favorable habitat for varieties of plant and animal species. Such forest were rich in livelihood resources like fuel-wood, building materials, medical material, wildlife, nuts, vegetables, among others. These forest resources were very important to the people as food for local use and items of trade to generate cash (Ikuponisi, 2002) consequently, the forests played significant role in the economic life of the people.

In Eleme traditional society, production and consumption had regard for sustainable utilization of forest resources. Thus, forest resources were not utilized in excess of their regenerative capacity. The implication was that forest resources were enjoyed by the people and were not regarded as commodities that could be exploited without considering their sustainability. The importance which Eleme traditional society attached to forest protection is buttressed by Ikuponisi (2002) assertion that:

The community had protected Buan forests for generations through the administration of the forests, by the Council of Chiefs and the elders. In the past sanctions and fines were effectively placed on the violations of the rules governing the use of the forests.

In traditional Eleme society, the forests were communally owned and managed for the benefits of every member of the society, as in most Eastern Nigerian societies. The essence was to prevent the forest from being depleted or degraded. It was ostensibly for this reason that rules, regulations and conditions necessary for healthy, profitable and sustainable exploitations of these resources were developed and imposed by the forest owning communities (Ogbuigwe, and Irikana, 2006).

The incorporations of Nigerian's economy into the world's capitalist system gave rise to the emergence of industrial capitalism. Consequently, the discovery of oil and gas in commercial quantity in Eleme Local Government Area attracted many small, medium and large scale capitalist enterprises. The presence of these industrial organizations precipitated the development of economic infrastructural facilities and social amenities by both the companies and the three tiers of governments. The obvious consequence is increased population that put pressure on land (Odoemelam, 2009). The competition for land acquisition engendered by industrial activities in Eleme not only destabilized the commercial land tenure system, but also precipitated the depletion of the forest-land in the area. Thus, Ikuponisi (2002:2) observed that:

The traditional forest protective practices are falling into disuse due to modern pressures like population increase, community oil industry competition for forest land...

The point being made here is that capitalist incursion into traditional Eleme society precipitated enormous changes in value system of the people. This change includes acquisitiveness, competitiveness and rugged individualism. These capitalist ethos facilitated that ease with which forest land were sold to capitalist entrepreneurs in the area. This phenomenon is captured by Mohiddin (1977:58 cf Olisa and Obiwu 1992) in the following words:

The linkage from the west engenders capitalism which fundamental values are those of acquisitiveness, competitiveness and individualism. These are antithetical to the cooperation and communal value of the pre-capitalist or traditional Africa. It follows that forest depletion in Eleme was a logical outcome of capitalist mode of production.

Theoretical Framework

Political economy is a tool of analysis for organizing approaches, concepts, theorems, hypotheses, and theories. This enables us to analyze, explain and predict the interplay of forces which determine not only the nature of capitalist and socialist economies, but also the structure of the present international political economy and the direction of change (Aja, 1998).

The relevance of Marxian political economy approach to this paper is the necessity to adopt a comprehensive theoretical approach. It accommodates the various dimensions of the consequences of industrial capitalism and its attendant depletion of forest lands in Eleme L.G.A. More importantly, the intermeshing of political economic and social factors of change in one ongoing historical process informed its adoption as a theoretical framework for this paper.

This approach (dialectal materialism) gives primacy to material or economic conditions of a society. It is premised on the belief that man's action is dominantly motivated by economic needs. Labour is therefore the very essence of material existence. Consequently, the thrust of this approach is on how the understanding of the society's superstructure depends primarily on the understanding of its economic substructure as defined by the relations between those who own the means of production and those who own only their labour power (Aja, 1998).

The fact that this approach emphasizes the relatedness of social phenomena particularly the economic, social and political structure gives it greater advantages as an analytical tool for the study of society. However, It is the economic factor which provide the axis around which all other movements take place and impact certain orderliness to interaction in society (Ake, 1981).

Political economy approach as a comprehensive social science of change is interdisciplinary and therefore enhances our understanding of the nature of internal relations, how a society manages and produces itself. It also enhances our understanding of the uses of tension, conflicts and conditions in society. Thus, the approach provides basis of understanding, the strength and weakness of differing socio-economic and political formations in societies. The implication is that political economic approach enables us to see exploitative industrial activities in Eleme from the interplay of economic and political forces at the global level.

The Historical Antecedents of Industrial Capitalism in Eleme

The colonization of the geographical entity today christened Nigeria by the British imperial authority precipitated the incorporation of Nigeria into the global capitalist orbit. This phenomenon gave rise to a system of inequality, new forms of production, consumption and values alien to traditional society of Nigeria. The inevitable consequence is the disarticulation of the traditional economy of Nigeria especially, with the gradual monetization of the traditional economic (Ake, 1981). In the words of Mohiddin (1977 cf. Olisa and Obiukwu, 233-234).

African's penetration by the capitalist therefore precipitated a large-scale cultural encounter between two sets of contradictory value systems. This phenomenon initiated a relentless and multifaceted assault upon African's non-capitalist values. The transplanting of capitalism into Nigeria and other non-capitalist societies arose from those contradictions, which reduced the rate of profit and arrested capitalization of surplus values. Faced with these problems, it became inevitable that the capital, forever bent on profit maximization, must of necessity look for other avenues (territories) in which the process of capital accumulation could be sustained. The inevitable consequences were that the capitalist turned to other societies, colonized, subjugated and integrated their economies into the world capitalist orbit (Ake, 1981). It was this phenomenon that incorporated Nigerian societies (Eleme inclusive) into the world's capital system with its attendant system of inequalities.

The Multinational Corporations (MNCs) were the instrument through which the British colonial administration maximally exploited Nigerian's economy. For example oil exploration in Nigeria dated back to 1937 when shell D'ARCY had the entire country as concession oil block. The statutory relinquishment of 50% of the concession granted to shell B.P in 1958, created an avenue for other multinational corporations (MNCs) to participate in the oil and gas exploration in Nigeria. The implication is that between 1960 and 1963, Texaco, Mobil, Gulf oil (New Chevron), Agip, Esso and Safrap (New Elf) were allocated oil blocks onshore and offshore. This development became the catalyst for large scale oil and gas exploitation in the Niger Delta Region Eleme inclusive (Onosode, 1992; Derek, 1998; Perterside, 2004), for example, in 1984 the Rivers State government acquired 122.193 hectares of land on behalf of the NNPC for the sitting of the second refinery in Alesa Eleme Community.

In 1982 the National Fertilizer Company of Nigeria (NAFCON) acquired 556.62 hectares of land from Onne Community of Eleme for fertilizer production. The Petrochemical Company

Limited acquired from Akpajo, Njuru, Koerewa, Aleto and Agbonicha Communities of Eleme 9 square kilometers (89 hectares) of land. The Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC) also acquired for its housing estate in 1982, from Aleto Eleme community 272.922 hectares (674.390 acres) of land. For the purpose of establishing the Onne Oil and Gas Export Free Zone, the federal government required 16 square kilometers of land in Onne and Ikpokiri communities in 1996. Vast acreages of land measuring 2,538; 175 hectares were acquired by Rivers State Government in September 8, 1980 for the establishment of the Federal Terminal at Onne Eleme (Ngofa, 2006).

In 1962 the Eastern Nigerian Government acquired 305.5 acres of land from Alasa Eleme community for the building of the first Port-Harcourt refinery (Ngofa, 2006). The Rivers State Government acquired in 1997 1,707 acres of land from Onne Eleme. The land was acquired for the purpose of establishing the Naval College and Federal Lighter Terminal (Ngofa, 2006: 142).

The Federal Government acquired 1,19 hectares of land for the establishment of a township and industrial area. The Rivers State Government also acquired 1,771.3 hectares of land for the establishment of the Onne Satellite Town which aimed at accommodating 100,00 person. The discovery of hydrocarbon in commercial quantity in Eleme Local Government Area and its environs in the 1960s and 1970s gave rise to many small, medium and large-scale capitalist enterprises being located in the area. Furthermore, the Federal Government belief that oil exploration holds the key to Nigerian's socio-economic development encouraged the Federal Government to create the enabling environment to sustain industrial development in the area.

Industrial Capitalism and Forest Land Depletion

The pre-capitalist Eleme society had very extensive forests that were favorable habitats for different plant and animals. These species became extinct due to increasing level of the destruction of the forest eco-systems. This phenomenon was precipitated by oil and gas exploitation by industrial organizations operating in the area (Ngofa, 2006). Before the commencement of oil and gas exploitation in the area, the forest lands were sustainably utilized. This became imperative given the enormous benefits the people derived from the forest resources. It was the sustainable use of forest land resources that made the traditional economic activities like hunting, craft works, herbal medicine, traditional mud house building, among other forest oriented occupations blossom. On the other hand, the unsustainable use of forest land in modern Eleme society has given rise to a situation in which kerosene is now a substitute for firewood. Various range of plastic product such as, chairs, tables, side stools etc. are now alternative to cane products. Medical roots and herbs have now been largely replaced by modern antibiotics in the area. This observation is in line with Cleaver and Donovan (1995) assertion that, “deforestation reduces substance option for rural forest dwellers”.

Communal ownership of land in Eleme traditional society made forest resources community resources. The implication was that communal ownership of forest provided institutional control mechanism against deforestation or any other forms of degradation. These traditional

forestland protective (regulatory) mechanisms ensure that the forest resources were sustainably utilized or harvested in the area. (2002.4). the importance of these pre-capitalist forest protective practices was highlighted by Ogbuigwe inter alia:

In traditional Africa societies, rules, regulations, conditions and habits necessary for healthy, profitable and sustainable exploitation of these resources were developed and imposed by the forest owing communities (Ogbuigwe, 1998 cf Irikana 2006).

The discovery of oil and gas in commercial quantity in Eleme and its environs encouraged the Federal and Rivers State governments to create the enabling environment for industrial development (particularly oil) in the area. Consequently, large numbers of small, medium and large scale industrial organizations were attracted into the area. To create a solid industrial base, the Federal and Rivers State governments required massive acreages of land for various industrial projects. The government also developed some economic industrial facilities like telecommunication, goods network of roads sea port, export processing zone etc. they also develop some social amenities like electricity, portable water among others.

The development of these economic infrastructural facilities and social amenities within the industrial area attracted large number of immigrants into Eleme L.G.A. The immigrants in the words of Bell-Gam, (1992) “came in search of greener pastures”. The alarming population triggered by industrial activities posed serious pressure on the existing forest land in the area. For example, as farmland became very limited, many indigenous people in desperate efforts to secure agricultural land went and deforested vast acreages of forest and converted them to agricultural land (Ashton and Douglas, 1994).

Land acquisition precipitated by industrial capitalism had no regard for traditions and customs of the indigenous Eleme people. The result was that even traditional lands (Sacred Forest) were acquired and utilized for industrial projects. For instance the land acquired for the first and second Port-Harcourt refineries (located in Alasa Eleme) transverse one of the famous traditional forestland called Onura Forest. The forestland was the abode of the deity Onura and was used for traditional ritual and worship. The presence of these refineries gave rise to massive deforestation and degradation of this vast traditional forestland as were the cases with other Eleme communities (Odoemelam, 2009).

The implication of the deforestation of the traditional forests by these capital enterprises was that it demystified the sacredness of the forests. It was believed that traditional forest were untouchable as they were believed to be the abode of the deities. The deforestation of these traditional forestlands through industrial activities gave rise to most traditional worshipers and non-worshipers to demystify the power of these deities. The consequence was that most traditional religious worshipers in the area joined Christian religion. Having imbibed Christian faith, all fares of “gods” were extinguished.

The enthusiasm generated by Christian faith among traditional religious converts induced massive depletion of traditional forests and their conversion into private land and land became

very limited, Ngofa (1994:213) asserts. That was how vast area of Juju forest which from ancient times were preserved for Onura in Alesa, Okaalor and Mgbaaagwa in Aleto, Oguleke and Mgbala in Ogale, Okulu in Agbonchia, Ngorwa and Kebijor in Ebubu as well as several other were gradually eliminated and converted to personal holdings.

As pressure on land occasioned by constant influx of companies and immigrants, persisted land became commoditized and commercialized. The commercialization of land resulted from government's massive land acquisitions on behalf of capitalist industrial establishments and government projects. These land acquisition had no regard for land needs of the people for agricultural production and the imperatives of the communal land tenure system in the area. The inevitable consequence was that most families shared their land to legitimate male family members to avoid acquisition of such land by government under the Land Use Act. The implication is that such land inherited by individual family members became private holdings. Consequently, those who wished to sell their land did so.

The Land Use Decree (1978) now Land Use Act vested all land in the state on the state governor. Part 1(1) of the Land Use Act (CAPL 5) state inter alia:

Subject to the provisions of this Acts, all land comprised in the territory of each state in the federation are hereby vested in the governor of the state such land shall be held in trust and administered for the use and common benefit of all Nigerians in accordance with the provision of this Act.

The implication is that land which was hitherto a community resource became controlled by the government. These external forces also arrogated to themselves the management of the community resources land. The consequence was that farmlands were acquired and utilized at a level that is detrimental to the traditional forest regulatory practices in the area. This situation gave rise to the collapse of the traditional forest protective practices. Capitalist land acquisition Depletion of the intensive competition forest land scare agricultural land Distortion of the traditional Destabilization of the forest regulatory practices traditional land tenure system

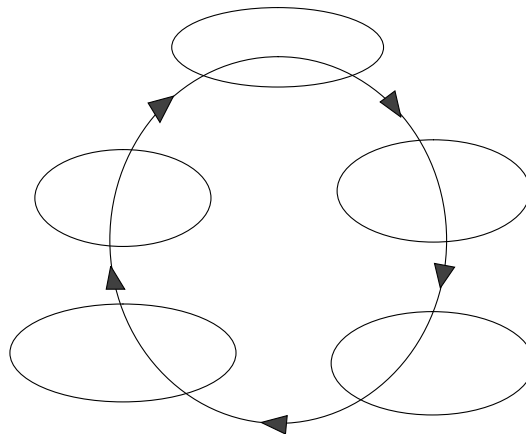


Fig. 1: Capitalist land acquisition and traditional regulatory practices (field survey, 2007)

Figure 1 shows the diagrammatic presentation of the relationship between capitalist land acquisition and the depletion of the forestland in Eleme Local Government Area. It shows that massive land acquisition by the capitalist enterprises (aided by the state and federal governments) induced shortage of land for agriculture. This phenomenon precipitated stiff competition for land acquisition. The struggle for land acquisition gave rise to the destabilization of the communal land tenure system which defined the regulated land acquisition in the area. This situation triggered the collapse of the traditional forest regulatory practices. The obvious implication is the unsustainable utilization of forest land resources and its attendant forestland depletion in Eleme. Thus, Ikuponisi argued that the forest protective practices are falling into disuses due to modern pressures like over population, oil-industry competition for forest lands (Ikupanisi, 2002).

Socio-Economic Implications of the Loss of the Forest Ecosystem

The forest performs vital functions in any society namely, the provisions of the rural population with many of their subsistence needs. These include food, fibers and medical materials, among others; the forest also performs ecological functions such as the maintenance and protection of watersheds and soil, the regulation of climate and provision of habitats for wild plant and animal species among others. The forest also performs economic functions such as being the source for some industrial materials. It is also an important source of foreign exchange in some societies of Africa (FAO/UNEP), Tropical Forest Resource Assessment, 1981). The important functions performed by the forest have become illusive to Eleme Communities due to capitalist industrial activities. The implication is that the people of the area that were rich in plant and animal species, have been dispossessed of these vital natural resources due to industrial activities. The alienation of forest land from the people meant alienating them from forest resources such as: fibers, fruits, nuts, wood, vegetables, snails, herb, and bush-meat among others. Evidence from study in the area showed that the people supplemented their incomes from farming with the harvest of forestland resources (Odoemelam, 2009).

The study also showed that the depletion of the forest ecosystems due to industrial capitalism gave rise to the extinction of most plants and animal species (biodiversity loss) in the area. This phenomenon impacted negatively on the people's economic activities. Such economic activities include: hunting, woodworks, traditional herbal medicine, farming, traditional building profession and other forest-oriented economic activities.

Forest depletion in Eleme Communities induced the emergence of new pattern of production and consumption. For instance, kerosene is now heavily depended on for domestic cooking instead of the traditional firewood brought from the forests. Various ranges of plastic products such as: chair, tables, side-stools etc are now alternatives to the traditional cane products sourced from the forests. The traditional healing homes that relied on roots leaves and herbs have been replaced by modern health-care centers largely dependent on modern antibiotics. Meat, snail, vegetables, nuts, fruits etc that were essentially sourced from the forest are now special food items brought into the local markets by strangers. This argument supports Cleaver and Donova, (1995) assertion that, “deforestation reduces subsequence option for natural forest dwellers”.

The thrust of the argument here is that industrial capitalism in Eleme society precipitated the destruction of the forest eco-systems. This phenomenon inevitably resulted to loss of assemblages of plant and animal species in the area. The obvious implication is the dislocation of the people's socio-economic means of livelihood.

Summary/Conclusion

Industrial capitalism in Eleme Local Government Area resulted from Federal Government's desire to encourage industrial development in Nigeria. This was given impetus by the discovery of oil and gas in commercial quantity in the area; the availability of abundant flat acreages of land that could support industrial expansion and the presence of seaport. The factors attracted many industrial organizations into the area. Furthermore, the development of economic infrastructural facilities and social amenities by the government (Federal and State) and the industrial organizations attracted large number of immigrants into the area (Bell-Gam, 1992).

The population increment induced by industrial activities in the area puts enormous pressure on land (forest inclusive). The consequence is stiff competition for land acquisition by industrial organizations, the government, social organizations and individuals. The obvious implication is the depletion of the forestland in Eleme. This phenomenon gave rise to destruction of the forest eco-system, with its attendant loss of assemblage of plant and animal species in the area. The consequences are the disruption of the ecological and socio-economic function of the forest.

In conclusion, the depletion of the forestland and its attendant biodiversity loss in Eleme resulted from Federal Government's policy aimed at increasing the revenue base of the nation through industrialization. The involvement of capitalist industrial organizations in resource exploitation (as expected in capitalist societies) introduced exploitative capitalist economic considerations that places premium on mass production, profit maximization and private ownership of means of production rather than resource sustainability. The implication is that forestland resources are acquired for economic activities beyond their traditional usage pattern (Schucking and Anderson, 1991).

Recommendations

1. There should be a deliberate government policy to stop further land acquisition by the major capitalist enterprises in any area where land has been found to be in short supply for the people's substance.
2. Major capitalist enterprises operating in the area should assist the people in forming big co-operative societies. The co-operative society would serve as an avenue for making the products of the companies and other essential goods available to the people of the area at subsidized prices.
3. Government should ensure that all companies assess the environmental and social impacts of their economic activities before the commencement of business. The essence is to ensure environmental sustainability and well being of members of society.

4. There should be joint effort between the companies and government in provision of employment opportunities and social amenities to the people of Eleme L.G.A.

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