

The State and Massacres in Nigeria: Lessons from the Niger Delta Region

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A b s t r a c t

There is enough evidence to suggest that massacres are perpetrated by various governments in the global community to subdue harmless and defenseless civilians. This research examines the rationale behind massacres in Nigeria and lessons learned with focus on the Niger Delta region. The study was qualitative in nature, relied on secondary data and employed the descriptive method of data analysis. The study argues that while the justifications for massacres have always been the preservation of national interest, protection of the economic base of the country and to instill fears in criminal minded persons or groups, the impacts are often very devastating and the culprits in most instances are not the victims. The study holds that in every massacre there are lessons to be learned by the perpetrators, the culprits and the victims and that there are more justifiable ways such as intelligent gathering and collaborative stakeholders' approach to address civil disturbance or criminality hence massacre should not be an option.

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Background to the Study

Massacres are often used by authoritarian regimes to instill fear or eradicate a group – ethnic, religious or political. The occurrence of massacres is not peculiar to a particular country. In the late 1880s, King Leopold II of Belgium (1885 – 1908) perpetrated series of massacres against the people of Congo Free state (now the Democratic Republic of Congo) (Rannard and Webster, 2020). Others within Africa are the Setif Guelina experience of May 8, 1945 in Algeria, the Nambuango Massacre of March 15, 1961 in Angola, the 1897 Benin punitive expedition led by British forces under the command of Admiral Sir Harry Rawson that invaded Benin City in an invasion that lasted 17 days, the Yekati 12 massacre of February 19, 1937 and lots more.

In post-colonial Africa, massacres have taken place in several areas, notable amongst them is the massacre of an estimated three hundred civilian men allegedly executed in the Central Malian community of Moura in late March 2022 (Human Rights Watch, 2022). A trader who was at Moura and was lucky to have escaped the massacre was quoted to have said:

White men speaking a bizarre language were deployed throughout the town. I wanted to flee but was afraid I'd be shot by the helicopter overhead. The white men arrested and then took me to a place near the sand dunes where I found hundreds of others. A Malian soldier kept saying, "you kill us at night, then by day pretend to be civilians." Each night people were taken out and shot. On Wednesday (March 30), they took 10 men including the fired I'd come to the market with. I could not look... I was afraid that if I looked at them, they would pick me too. Throughout the different nights – that is when most of the killings were done. I heard people whispering, "oh God, they just took Haidou or Hassan for execution" (Human Rights Watch, 2022).

The horrific experience of the Malian trader is not an isolated experience. Nigerians across different geo-political zones have had various incidents of massacres. The incident of massacres in Nigeria can be classified into: the colonial massacres and the post-colonial massacres. The infamous Benin massacre of 1897 which resulted in the fall of the Benin empire remain outstanding in the discourse of massacres in the colonial era in Nigeria while post-colonial Nigerian state has recorded several instances of massacres: the Asaba massacre of 1967, the Bakolori massacre of 1980, Zaki Biam massacre of 2001, amongst others.

The 1999 constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria in Section 217 and 218 deals with the establishment and operations of the armed forces in Nigeria. while the composition and establishment of the armed forces is captured in section 217(1) thus: There shall be an armed forces for the federation which shall consist of an Army, a Navy, an Air Force and such other branches of the armed forces of the federation as may be established by an Act of the National Assembly.

Section 217(2) in its subsections listed the functions of the armed forces to include to:

- i) Defend the country from external aggression,
- ii) Maintain the territorial integrity and secure the country's borders from violation on land, sea or air,
- iii) Suppress insurrection and act in aid of civil authorities to restore order when called upon to do so by the President but subject to such conditions as may be prescribed by an Act of the National Assembly, and
- iv) Perform such other functions as may be prescribed by an Act of the National Assembly.

Section 218 gives the President of the county the power to determine the operational use of the armed forces of the federation including the powers to appoint the service heads of the armed forces. Studies have shown that the armed forces have always been used to carry out massacres and invasions of communities across the country. Using selected communities as a case study, this research attempts to provide answers to the following questions:

- i) What is the justification for the massacres?
- ii) Do the justifications serve the purpose?
- iii) Are there no alternatives to massacres in Nigeria?

Conceptual and Theoretical Clarification

Massacre

Massacre, genocide and mass killings are concepts that are used interchangeably. While genocide and mass killings have settled meaning and can simply be said to be the deliberate murder of a whole group or race of people, massacre has no settled definition. The definition of massacre can either be conventional or stipulative. However, massacre in a sentence, is the killing of a large number of harmless or defenseless people, mostly civilians.

Benz (2001) defined massacre as the mass murder and mutilation of innocent victims by an assailant or assailants immediately present at the scene. On his part, Jacques (2007) sees massacre as "a form of action that is most often collective and aimed at destroying non-combatants." Some analysts argue that when the killing is necessitated by the actions of those that are killed, it cannot be classified as massacre. Also, the implication of Jacques' definition is that for massacre to take place, the victim should be non-combatants. For instance, if the Nigerian military bomb and kill about 300 Boko-Haram members, the killings cannot be classified as massacres because Boko Haram is a combatant group.

Levene and Robert (1999), cited Dwyer and Ryan wrote that massacre occurs when "a group of animals or people lacking in self-defense at least, at a given moment, are killed usually by another group who have the physical means, the power with which to undertake the killing without physical danger to themselves." Dwyer and Ryan believed that in order to classify a mass killing as a massacre, "the perpetrators have to be present at the killing site and that the act of killing has to involve the direct physical intervention

of the perpetrators. In other words, massacre is limited by time and space.” The debate on the most acceptable classification of massacre will continue for a long time and since we do not intend to be dragged into the controversies, the narrative of massacre as 'a well-planned reprisal, usually in the form of an armed attack on a camp of sleeping men, women and children' serves the purpose of this research. Sleeping men, women and children in this context implies harmless and defenseless civilians.

The Niger Delta

Niger Delta does not mean the same thing to its numerous users. The region is often described to satisfy certain interests and in most instances, while a definition of the Niger Delta is acceptable to a group, it is not acceptable to another group depending on the motive of such definition. Ibaba (2017) identified the geographic definition of the Niger Delta that recognizes the six South-South geopolitical states of Akwa-Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo, and Rivers as the Niger Delta and the Political definition that added Abia, Imo and Ondo states to the six South-South states making it nine states as the Niger Delta. Both descriptions of the Niger Delta serve the purpose of this study, however, because the political definition is the acceptable definition in policy circles, it is the working definition in this research.

The political definition of the Niger Delta as reported by Volume Four of the Niger Delta Environmental Survey (1997) and cited by Ikporukpo (2011) placed the limits of the Niger Delta cartographically thus:

- i. North at Abor
- ii. West from the Benin River estuary
- iii. East to the Imo River estuary
- iv. South to palm pout, below Akassa and the Nun River estuary.

Weber's Theory of Force

Max Weber saw the use of force by the state as a necessary tool to ensure survival and citizens' compliance to law and order. In his lecture, "Politics as a Vocation", which he delivered on January 28, 1919 in Munich to the "Free Student Union" of Bavaria, Weber identified the state as a "...human community that (successfully) claims the monopoly of legitimate use of physical force within a given territory (Munro, nd). Weber's postulation which is seen as a norm in several sovereign states suggests that besides the state, the use of force by any group or individual constitute a threat to the existence of the state. The various massacres carried out by the Nigerian state are seen as approaches to check the activities of groups or individuals that are classified as threats to the state.

Methodology

This study is qualitative in nature; it is interpretative and attempts to study acts of massacre in Nigeria and lessons they offer. Data was sourced from already published materials and official documents in the archives of relevant governmental ministries and parastatals. Specific sources of data for the study include: official government gazettes, documents from relevant nongovernmental organizations, relevant journals articles and

reports of interventionist agencies in the Niger Delta. Lastly, the descriptive method was adopted for presentation and analysis of data.

Massacres: Evidence from the Niger Delta

The Niger Delta region has witnessed varying dimensions of state-sponsored massacres. Some that gained international significance are listed below:

The Odi Massacre

The Odi invasion of November 20, 1999 can be classified as a massacre against the people of the community. Odi is an Ijaw community in Kolokuma/Opokuma local government area of Bayelsa state in the South-South region of Nigeria. The community is described by some analysts to be the second largest Ijaw indigenous community (Ikporukpo, 2010). Sidiq (2019) wrote that the massacre of Odi was the consequence of the killing of some men in the Nigerian Police Force (NPF) by youths allegedly from Odi community. Onyeji (2019) also believes that the massacre of Odi by men of the Nigerian armed forces can be attributed to the killing of twelve policemen and further ambushing of soldiers by a militant group that had its base in Odi. It is believed that men of the armed forces that were ambushed engaged the militant group in a gun battle before the group was eventually overpowered.

Prior to the massacre, the then president of the country, Olusegun Obasanjo wrote a five paragraphed letter to the Bayelsa state governor, Diepreye Alamiyeseigha. In the letter, the President registered his displeasure over the killings and gave the governor two weeks' ultimatum from November 1999 to restore calmness in the community and by extension, the state, failure of which a state of emergency will be declared in Bayelsa state. A part of the letter read thus:

...These killings from reports reaching me were committed in broad daylight. It should be quite easy therefore to arrest the killers with whom it is reported that your government was holding negotiations before killing of the policemen and those with whom your government had negotiated in the past. They are criminals... I gave you 14 (fourteen) days within which to restore law and order in your state and effect the arrest and prosecution of all those responsible for these killings, failing which I shall set in a motion and process to declare a state of emergency in Bayelsa State. On my part, no stone will be left unturned to protect law-abiding citizens everywhere in Nigeria (Amnesty International Annual Report Entries on Nigeria, 1968 – 2010).

Unfortunately, on the 20th of November, four days to the expiration of the two weeks' ultimatum, battle-ready men of the Nigerian armed forces numbering about two thousand entered the community and razed down everything in sight. Sidiq (yearee) cited a civil society report on the Odi massacre in the following words:

Four days to the expiration of the two-week ultimatum, President Obasanjo ordered soldiers into Odi and the surrounding communities.

The East-West road was blocked by the Orashi River at Mbiama Junction and by the River Niger at Patani. Thereafter, it was war and terror in Odi (A report by Environmental Right and Friends of the Earth – Nigeria, 2002 cited by Sidiq (2002).

Of all the various accounts of the massacre, one that I have found particularly arresting is by the Environmental Rights Action and Friends of the Earth – Nigeria (2002). They wrote and I quote:

...We saw so many corpses by the roadside as we drove along. The body of an old man, still clutching firmly to a copy of the Holy Bible, lay decomposing in a pond behind the Anglican Church, a chilly testimony to the scorched-earth objective of the invading troops contrary to the officially declared objective of the mission – to arrest hoodlums who allegedly killed some policemen. So complete was the destruction that crops were razed, yam barns were burnt, garri processing plants were willfully wrecked, canoes were set ablaze and every house in the entire community with exception of the First Bank, a community health center and the Anglican church were burnt down. No aspect of the community's existence was spared.

...We saw no single livestock, poultry and other domestic animal except a stray cat. The community's 60,000 inhabitants had fled into the forest or been arrested or killed. Only a few thoroughly traumatized old women, old men and children could be seen around, some of them suffering from fractures and other injuries sustained while trying to escape from advancing soldiers. We also received information that the soldiers were particularly contemptuous of looks. Several libraries and educational materials were targeted and destroyed (Environmental Rights Action and Friends of the Earth, 2002, 4).

The President's justification for the massacre was that policemen that were on legitimate assignment in Odi were killed by suspected militants based in the community and that if he has to retain the ability to be able to send security men anywhere their services were needed, he has to prove to them that their lives matter. The massacre is to serve as a deterrent to others that such manner of impunity is a crime against the state (Obasanjo, 2014). However, the then Minister of Defense, General Theophilus Danjuma while addressing the Ministerial conference of the Economic Committee of West African States (ECOWAS) was quoted to have stated that the operation was initiated with the mandate of protecting lives and properties, particularly the operations of the oil producing companies (The Guardian Newspaper, 26th November, 1999, p. 6).

The Gbaramatu Kingdom Massacre

Gbaramatu kingdom is an Ijaw kingdom in Warri South-West Local Government area of Delta state. The kingdom is made up of about 50 communities with Oporoza as its

traditional headquarters. On May 13, 2009, men of the Nigerian armed forces invaded some communities – Oporoza, Okerenkoko, TEBizo and Okpeleama – in the kingdom. The massacre of May 13, 2009 is one amongst many other massacre of communities in the kingdom. The Nigerian army bombed Oporoza community during one of the kingdom's festivals, 'the Amasiekumor Festival,' because it was believed that during the festival, sons and daughters of the kingdom will be in the community for the festival.

The spokesperson of the Gbaramatu Traditional Council, Chief Godspowr Gbenekema was alleged to have said that the massacre of the kingdom was an attempt by soldiers to protect oil facilities in the area (Okafor, 2016). While denying the assertion of Gbenekema, the armed forces through the coordinator of its joint media cadre of the Joint Task Force in the region said “the troops were in search of suspected militants who had regrouped to resuscitate a camp earlier destroyed.” The Gbaramatu invasion is indeed a massacre against the people of the kingdom. Watts (2009) wrote that the massacre of May 13 1999 by the Joint Task Force “displaced thousands of poor villagers and killed hundreds of innocent civilians.”

The massacre drastically affected oil producing companies operating in the Niger Delta because as Watts further wrote, from “mid-May to Mid-July 2009, Ijaw militants launched twelve attacks on Nigeria's oil infrastructure.” The attacks made Agip to declare *force majeure* on its Brass fields while Shell “following several devastating attacks on well-heads and pipelines near Escravos (in the West) and the Cawthorne (in the East) was losing twenty million US dollars in differed production from its onshore operations” (Watts, 2009).

Massacre of Ayakoromo Community

Ayakoromo is an Ijaw community in Burutu Local Government Area of Delta State. the community was invaded by the Joint Task Force (JTF) arm of the Nigerian Armed Forces on December 1, 2010 and it continued till December 3, 2010. The JTF deployed jet fighters, helicopters, gun-ship and soldiers in the massacre. At the end of the massacre, the entire Ayakoromo community was razed to the ground. The massacre was carried out because the military was looking for a militant leader known as John Toko, who was alleged to be an indigene of Ayakoromo community. The JTF commander, Major General Charles Omoregie confirmed the allegation when he claimed that “...the military had overrun John Togo's camp” and vowed that his men will apprehend John Togo to eliminate the criminal gangs from the Niger Delta ([https:// pmnewsnigeria.com](https://pmnewsnigeria.com)).

Massacres: Rationale and Lessons Learned

Massacres are always very gruesome and devastating. What can then be the justification for a state sponsored massacre against its citizenries? Does the justification serve the purpose? The continuous survival of a state is the basic concern of any leader and if the survival capacity of the state is threatened, any action to restore normalcy is considered legitimate. The various massacres of communities in the Niger Delta are carried out on the directive of the commander in chief of the armed forces to among other rationales,

protect the economic infrastructure of the Nigerian state and to ensure that the operations of the oil companies are not disrupted. The address of the Nigerian defense minister to the ministerial conference of ECOWAS that “the operation HAKUR II was initiated with the mandate of protecting lives and properties, particularly oil platforms and flow stations in the region...” attests to that claim (The Guardian Newspaper, 26th November, 1999 cited by Sidiq, 2019).

The Niger Delta is the home to the country's oil industries (Ibaba, 2007; 2012; Etekpe, 2007; Ikelegbe, 2001) therefore, any form of militancy in the region is seen as a threat to the economic survival of the country. Alaibe (2010) holds that:

By January 2009, militancy in the Niger Delta had virtually crippled Nigeria's economy. Investment inflow to the upstream sub-sector of the industry had dwindled remarkably. Exasperated foreign investors had begun redirecting their investments to Angola and Ghana as preferred destination over Nigeria. At that point, Angola surpassed Nigeria as Africa's highest crude oil producer. This dwindling investment in the critical oil and gas sector threatened Nigeria's capacity to grow its crude oil reserve as planned... Clearly, insecurity in the Niger Delta was identified as a key reason why investors were leaving for more stable business opportunities in Africa. For example, due to militant activities in the Niger Delta, Royal Dutch Shell by early 2009 saw its production drop from oil 4 million barrels per day (bpd) to about 250,000 bpd... Sabotage, oil siphoning racket and kidnappings of oil workers by suspected militants further threatened the operation of the oil companies and exerted immense pressure on the Nigerian economy (Alaibe 2010, 2).

The Civil Liberties Organization (CLO) in a press conference conducted on 13th December 1999 remarked that the massacre of Odi community was pre-meditated, it was perpetrated four days to the end of the ultimatum that was given to the then state governor by the president. As CLO puts it, “the operation was carefully planned to annihilate the people in order to make it smooth and easy for oil companies” (<https://www.africa.upenn.edu>). Several other massacres of communities in the Niger Delta have always been blamed on the activities of militant groups that have threatened the operations of oil companies.

Closely related to the protection of economic base of the country as a justification for state-sponsored massacre of communities in the Niger Delta is the preservation of the national interest of the country (national interest in simple terms is the means through which the independence and sovereignty of a country can be safeguarded. It is what is best for a country at any given time). If the national interest of a country is threatened, any action taken by the government to preserve it is interpreted by the government to be morally justifiable. The invasion of Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya are morally justifiable by the American government (Doherty, 2004; Harding, 2004).

The Daily Trust on 27th August 2018 captured part of the President Muhammadu Buhari's address to the 59th annual conference of the Nigerian Bar Association in Abuja on 26th August 2018. The president was quoted to have said national interest supersedes individual/group rights. Similarly, in a Supreme Court judgment delivered by Ibrahim Tanko Muhammad (JSC) between Asari Dokubo (Plaintiff) vs Federal Republic of Nigeria (Respondent), the learned judge ruled that national interest supersedes every other interest (<http://www.vanguardngr.com>).

The unity and corporate existence of Nigeria are sacrosanct. The federal government deploys the federal armed forces to handle challenges that threatens them. This point was emphasized by President Muhammadu Buhari when he hosted some government officials to a Sallah homage at his official residence in July 2016 (<https://businessday.ng>). The massacres of communities in the Niger Delta on the order of the President is to pass the message in the words of former President Obasanjo, that “impunity must not be encouraged in any form or circumstance” (Obasanjo, 2014, 303).

In similar vein, the various massacres are perpetrated to serve as a deterrent to individuals or groups that are criminal minded. A former Flag Officer commanding Central Naval Command, Yenagoa, Bayelsa State, Rear Admiral Apochi Suleiman made this point as a news conference at the JTF headquarters in Igbogene, Yenagoa. He added that, “we are not invading any community, what we are saying is that any community harboring killers of our soldiers should bring out the killers or we will use all at our disposal to find out the killers (<https://guardian.ng>).

Massacres in the Niger Delta: Lessons Learned

This study believes massacres of communities in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria have not served any justifiable purpose if the purpose is to protect the economic base of the country. As Alaibe (2010), Report of the Technical Committee on the Niger Delta (2009), and Ikporukpo (2010) noted, between 1999 when the Odi massacre took place and 2009 when the Yar'Adua led administration opened a two-month amnesty window that lasted from August 6, 2009 to October 4, 2009, militancy and the disruption of the activities and operations of oil companies in the Niger Delta was at its peak. Ikporukpo (2010) pointed out that the first noteworthy case of kidnapping was in 2005, when the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) kidnapped nine foreign oil workers in Delta state to press for the release of Asari Dokubo, a leader of another militant group, Niger Delta People's Volunteer Force (NDPVF) who was being detained by the federal government. It is also note-worthy that most of the renown militant groups in the Niger Delta came into existence between the same period. These groups include:

- i. Niger Delta People's Volunteer Force (NDPVF) was founded in 2004.
- ii. Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) was founded in 2004.
- iii. The Niger Delta Avengers (NDA) announced its existence in 20c6.

Studies have further shown that there were upsurges in criminal activities such as sabotage of oil facilities, illegal oil bunkering, hostage takings in the early 2000s after the

Odi massacre. Ikporukpo (2008) captured a notable case of sabotage that was carried out on Thursday, June 19 2008 by MEND on Bonga Field, Shell's largest oil field/platform located about 120 miles (1 nautical mile = 1.15 miles or 1.852km) from the coast of the Forcados Terminal in Delta State. The table below shows trend of sabotage of oil facilities from 1999 to 2007.

Table 1.

S/No	Year	Vandalization	Rupture
1.	1999	497	27
2.	2000	984	137
3.	2001	461	26
4.	2002	516	26
5.	2003	779	48
6.	2004	895	76
7.	2005	2,237	21
8.	2006	3,674	9
9.	2007	3,224	20

Source: NNPC Annual Statistics Bulletin

The argument of this paper is that various massacres of communities in the Niger Delta have not served as a deterrent to criminal minded individuals or groups. In a similar vein, national interest is centered on economic interest, political interest, security interest, cultural interest of a country and these have not been promoted by the different massacres of communities in the Niger Delta.

Conclusion

The study concludes that the rationale for perpetrating massacres in the Niger Delta which include – protection of the economic infrastructures of the country, preservation of the national interest of the country and to serve as deterrent to criminal minded individuals or groups have not served the purpose as various studies have shown an upsurge in crime and criminal activities after the various massacres.

Recommendations

The activities associated with massacres make it imperative to adopt a collaborative stakeholder (government, community leaders and individuals or groups) approach in curtailing issues that result in massacres. The following recommendations are expedient in this context:

- i) Massacres should not be an option in addressing the challenges of communities in the Niger Delta. The federal government in collaboration with other levels of government should make use of intelligence gathering techniques to ensure that persons that engage in criminality are arrested and prosecuted in accordance with extant laws. It should however be noted that most of these crimes: vandalization of oil facilities, kidnapping/hostage taking that sometimes result in death of victims, sabotage, are borne out of frustrations that are caused by the activities

- and operations of oil companies in the region. As condemnable as the crimes are, the government and the interventionist agencies in the region should address the development challenges in the area.
- ii) The engagement of militant groups by the federal government through the amnesty programme and payment of a monthly allowance of sixty-five thousand naira (N65,000.00) to each registered youth of the region created a form of inclusiveness amongst the youths. However, this study holds that the criterion for identifying the youths for registration and payment is not error-proof. The government should therefore, involve the community leaders in the process and can engage the youths to serve as local vigilante to be sure that they are paid for job-done.
 - iii) Lastly, community leaders and youth bodies should be enlightened by non-governmental organizations, pressure groups, the academia and so on that, community based criminality attracts devastating repercussions. Communities should therefore, ensure that their areas of jurisdiction are devoid of criminals or criminal activities.

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