

The Option of Death, Egbesu and the Narrative of Protection: Empirical Evidence from Ijaw Armed Group Fighters in the Niger Delta of Nigeria

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ABSTRACT: *Studies have shown that the ultimate consideration intrastate armed group fighters have is the risk of losing their lives in the course of the conflict they execute. Irrespective of how weak or unprepared their enemies seem to be, they do not gloss over this possibility. To this end, they invest a lot of time, energy and resources in ensuring adequate and effective recruitment, training, and armament to ascertain minimal casualty, at least. But, could there be a case where death is not an option for consideration for armed group fighters? This paper casts its searchlight on the armed group fighters in the Niger Delta who invoke the powers of Egbesu, the deity or god of war and justice as they take up arms against the security apparatuses of the Nigerian state and the multinational oil companies. Theoretically, it draws insights from literature on earlier insurgencies and uprisings in Africa, especially the “magic” African guerrillas. Empirically, the paper relies on data collected through narrative and semi-structured interviews with the fighters during field works in the Niger Delta region. From these data, which are coded on MAXQDA software and analysed by Qualitative Content Analysis method, there is strong evidence that the Ijaw armed group fighters do not consider the possibility of death as a viable option. Egbesu is found worthy of protecting the fighters as long as they abide by its principles and the war is within their understanding of justice. This is a burgeoning insight in understanding motivations for armed resistance in Africa, the paper argues.*

Keywords: Armed Groups, Death, Egbesu, Magic, Niger Delta

I. INTRODUCTION

Despite a seeming thrive of insurgency in many countries around the world, especially in the Global South, it does not still, at least in principle, undermine the general assumption of sovereignty and legitimacy those countries have. They remain countries with full and operational state machineries including control of the armed forces. So, when private individuals aggregate themselves in groups to fight against the machineries of the state, they are fully aware of the force they are up against. They know they are in a disadvantaged position battling against several odds like mobilizing sufficient fighters, acquiring arms sophisticated enough to challenge the state, the high risk of battle-related deaths, winning local, national and international sympathy and support (legitimacy), leadership issues, sustenance of members and sustaining the conflict, to mention but a few. All the motivations advanced for insurgencies will amount to nothing if fighters themselves do not have the assurance that they will be adequately protected. Certainly, only a limited number of brave persons, whose incentive comes either mainly from a sense of national pride and call to duty or the knowledge of the fact that death is inevitable, will willingly take up arms. In most modern armed conflicts, this is accomplished militarily by putting in place effective mobilization, organizing specialized trainings for fighters and ensuring arms acquisitions. But this is often lacking in cases of insurgencies where insurgent groups are often weaker, poorer and less armed with sophisticated weapons than the established state military. This partly explains why such groups, oft-times, resort to guerrilla warfare strategies. This notwithstanding, there is yet an alarming increase in outbreak of insurgencies around the world, especially in the Global South [1]. In 2009 alone, there were 36 active armed conflicts around the world with a substantial figure taking place in sub-Saharan Africa [2]. The Niger Delta conflict was one of them.

At the end of 1998, hundreds of youth from across the Niger Delta, precisely of the Ijaw extraction, gathered in Kaiama to form the Ijaw Youth Council (IYC). Whilst the IYC is not an armed group, its composition at inception included several ethnic militias (posing as organizations) that have emerged in 1997 to fight on the Ijaw side against their neighboring Itsekiri during the Warri crisis. Some of these militias are the Federated Niger Delta Ijaw Communities (FNDIC), the Egbesu Boys of Africa (EBA), Feibagha Ogbo, Feibokirifagha Ogbo, Meinbutu Boys and Dolphin [3]. Despite the non-violent stance adopted by the IYC, it provided the structure and rationalization which the emerging armed groups accentuated as their driving force. In addition to the Kaiama Declaration being the alleged cornerstone for the armed struggle, several leaders of the IYC like Asari Dokubo and Bello Oboko turned out to be founders of armed groups. But then, even if the claims of and references the fighters make to marginalization, lack of self-determination and environmental

pollution are anything to go by and all attempts to address these issues non-violently have failed, it does not still make light the task of understanding the *raison d'être* for armed rebellions.

The question to answer in this paper, therefore, is: to what extent does impossibility of death constitute motivation for armed group violence by the Ijaws of the Niger Delta in Nigeria? In other words, why did the danger of being killed not impede armed struggle in the Niger Delta?

The central argument advanced here is that death is not an option for consideration by the Ijaw armed group fighters because of their brazen appropriation of metaphysical powers through an ultimate belief in and worship of Egbesu. For them, Egbesu commands them to engage in warfare and is, therefore, worthy of protecting the fighters as long as they abide by its principles and the war is within their understanding of justice. This is a burgeoning insight in understanding motivations for armed resistance in Africa especially as it challenges polarized explanations, for instance, the greed-grievance thesis, for outbreak of violent conflicts on the continent.

For the theoretical basis of this paper, insights are drawn from literature on earlier insurrections and uprisings in Africa which could be referred to as the “magic” African guerrillas. Methodologically, this paper is inspired by grounded theory. This suggests that the author does not hold strongly to preconceived ideas or notions, but rather is as open as possible to the data encountered in the field [4]. The primary data are derived through narrative and semi-structured interviews as well as focus group discussions with armed groups’ members, non-governmental organizations, academics, government officials and non-members of armed groups during five-month research stay in the Niger Delta to do justice to the question. The process of analyzing these data follows a consistent format: after using the MAXQDA software to do an open coding of the entire transcribed interviews, themes on which the analysis is based were generated. Because of assurances of confidentiality, the references made to the interview respondents are coded such that the first three letters designate their background, the next two, their names, the last two, their location and the numerals, the sequence. For instance, AGMNMHA01 would mean: armed group member, Nelson Mandela, Hamburg and the first among armed group members interviewed. The coding for group discussions is different. The first three letters show it is a group discussion instead of an interview, the next two, their background, the last two, their location and the numerals, the sequence. So, GRDNANA01 would mean: group discussion with non-members of armed groups, Nairobi and the first among the group discussions conducted. Following this, I employ the method of Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA) for the proper interpretation of my data and presentation of the research findings. The QCA enables a researcher describe their qualitative material in a systematic way by assigning successive parts of their material to the categories of their coding frame [5].

The structure is as follows: after the introduction comes a brief reflection on relevant literature. This is immediately followed by an overview of contemporary armed group struggle by the Ijaw ethnic nationality. The next section captures the discussion of the central argument of the paper. Finally, there is the conclusion.

II. BRIEF REFLECTION ON LITERATURE

A study of armed conflicts in some parts of sub-Saharan Africa shows that some armed groups invoke metaphysical and supernatural powers for protection as they venture into war. One example will be the African magic guerrillas in Northern Uganda. Heike Behrend’s work [6] has provided significant insights into the workings of African societies, especially as they have to do with the seamless blend of religion and war. In spite of the level of preparedness, warriors believe that the success of the wars they embark on ultimately lies in the hands of the gods or some supernatural forces. They typically, therefore, devote sufficient time in appeasing the gods and invoking them for protection through worship and offer of sacrifices. In the case of Uganda, the people of Acholi in the north had still not recovered fully from the political setback that led to the forceful overthrow of the regime of Milton Obote as well as the defeat of the interim government of Tito Okello by the Yoweri Museveni-led National Resistance Army (NRA) 1985. Given that the displaced governments were headed by the Acholis, whose people also dominated the country’s army, they perceived this development as a disaster they must fix by all means necessary; including through armed violence [7]. This was the background against which Alice Lakwena (born Alice Auma) [8], the spirit medium that was not possessed by ancestral ghosts but rather by strangers [9], mobilized under the Holy Spirit Movement (HSM) and called “on Acholi to rescue their nation from defeat and humiliation” [10]. The aggrieved soldiers and new recruits heeded this call, but instead of essentially arming themselves with modern weapons of war, they rather fortified themselves with spiritual forces. Within months, they had recorded significant successes before the movement finally fell to the NRA by the end of 1987 [11]. Tim Allen [12] recounts how the NRA soldiers fled having been surprised and terrified to behold hundreds of men (members of the HSM) coming out of the bush singing, their half-naked bodies gleaming with oil to protect them from bullets, and walking upright without taking cover. Even with the collapse of the HSM, or the Lakwena Movement, the appeal to spiritual forces to embark on armed conflict continued with the emergence of the Lord’s Liberation Army (LRA) founded by Joseph Kony [13]. The LRA would go ahead to mobilize an armed group to prosecute longer (and more vicious) insurgency in Uganda with an

unprecedented scale of violence [14]. Although thousands of fighters lost their lives fighting on the sides of the HSM and the LRA, it is intellectually challenging to think about the belief in the protective powers of spiritual forces and the significance of this in understanding armed conflicts in Africa. Earlier during the liberation war in Zimbabwe and in the armed conflict in Mozambique, fighters were also known to appreciate the importance of employing spirit mediums for their struggles [15].

III. OVERVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY ARMED GROUP VIOLENCE BY THE IJAW ETHNIC NATIONALITY

As an overview of how the armed groups emerged and proliferated, and what factors influenced it, I would like to start from the moment, which, according to field data, marked the commencement of genuine and collective armed struggle by the Ijaw youth. This dates back to December 1998 when the Ijaw Youth Council (IYC), an outcome of the much talked about Kaiama Declaration, was formed. Without belaboring the litany of grievances the Ijaw youth had against the Nigerian government, it is worthwhile to note that there was a growing resentment among them against their leaders and representatives and fathers, as it were, who operated under the auspices of the Ijaw National Congress (INC). The INC had been formed in the early 1990s to bring together the entire Ijaw ethnic nationality already balkanized into several coastal states of the Niger Delta to address their problems some of which were socio-economic neglect, political marginalization and growing population of unemployed youth [16]. These youth believed that it was either that their leaders were too slow and conventional in their approach to the problems or they were just playing to the gallery. They needed to organize themselves fast and act, albeit non-violently, more so given that the current transition to civilian rule could enable them have more bargaining powers and better socio-economic cum political stakes if they negotiated and/or threatened effectively. So, getting increasingly distraught with the status quo, they converged in Kaiama on December 11, 1998 to determine their destiny.

The gathering which comprised representatives from five hundred communities, more than forty clans and twenty-five organizations ended by electing Hon. Felix Tuodolo as its first President, endorsing a ten-point resolution known as the Kaiama Declaration, hereafter, the Declaration. As expected, the IYC's main concerns bordered on ownership and control of natural resources, self-determination, demilitarization of the Niger Delta, clean, healthy, unpolluted environment, peaceful coexistence with neighboring ethnic groups, distrust in the democratic transition program, and rejection of the Federal Republic of Nigeria for a Sovereign National Conference which would be a democratic federation of all ethnic nationalities in Nigeria [17]. The fighters I interviewed cited this event and the Declaration as the basis for the organized armed struggle that followed suit. Whereas the FNDIC predated the Declaration, for instance, one of its main leaders was quick to fall back on the referred resolutions above as the ideology behind their struggle. According to him: "The Niger Delta struggle from the Ijaw axis is encapsulated in what we call the historic Kaiama Declaration... In the Ijaw case, our position, our claim to Nigeria is defined and found in the historic Kaiama Declaration. The cornerstones of the Kaiama Declataion are struggles for resource control, true federalism, environmental justice and self-determination." [18]

Shortly after the Declaration was formulated, the parent body, the INC ratified it as a working document that met the needs of their people. The IYC, thereafter, set out to engage the government non-violently, sometimes through some of its non-violent member groups. They organized peaceful demonstrations, carrying placards displaying demands based on the resolutions. The government of the day felt threatened by these protests and pulled the string of repressive mechanism, molesting, arresting and jailing some of the protesters [19]. State repression got heightened with the complete destruction of some communities, for instance Umuechem in Rivers State and Odi in Bayelsa State. While the government through its security operatives totally destroyed 495 houses in Umuechem for protesting against environmental damage and neglect by Shell, it destroyed Odi community because some youths allegedly killed eight police officers [20]. Meanwhile, the IYC leadership responded peacefully to these molestations while they arranged for the release of their arrested members through dialogue and other non-violent means. The IYC got severely criticized internally for being too peaceful by the pro-violence groups that made it up [21].

Also championing these protests was the Movement for the Survival of Ijaw Ethnic Nationality (MOSIEN) headed by Timi Kaiser-Wilhelm Ogoriba (popularly addressed as T.K. Ogoriba), who was a joint signatory to the Kaiama Declaration with the IYC President, Felix Tuodolo. T.K Ogoriba is regarded as one of the worthy representatives of the Ijaws. He commands a lot of respect throughout the region. So, his leading a demonstration (peaceful) was just sufficient enough to pull out supporters in their numbers. Realizing this, the government pulled again the repressive stunt in 1999 by arresting and jailing him. Although mobile network and internet were uncommon then, word about his arrest soon got out and the Ijaw youth rallied tremendously and enthusiastically vowing to ensure his release, no matter what it would take. Apart from the FNDIC armed mobilization of 1997 which was ideological but sectional, this marked the first armed/violent mobilization that

would involve all Ijaw youth across the coastal states of the Niger Delta. They gathered massively, again, in Kaiama, each with their Egbesu protection, dispossessed some policemen of their arms and embarked on the forty-five minute journey to Yenagoa, Bayelsa State capital, where Ogoriba was being held. Fortified by Egbesu, they evaded fire-shots and attacks from the state security forces arranged in military formations, captured their artilleries and got Ogoriba released [22].

The success of this operation, more so, the perceived efficacy of the Egbesu power was fundamental to the break out of many members of the IYC to form violent groups as a way of advancing the struggle. A spectacular example which demonstrates one of the internal conflicts in the IYC and the proliferation of armed groups is the problem between Asari and Ateke. Asari Dokubo's tenure as the president was alleged to have expired and Ateke Tom was aspiring to that same office. This made both of them to fall out seriously and both parties left the IYC. Asari formed the Niger Delta Peoples Volunteer Force, while Ateke formed the Niger Delta Vigilante [23].

But there were other factors contributing to the proliferation of groups. It is no secret that there are so many economic incentives accruing from the activities of the armed groups, ranging from pipeline vandalization, to hostage taking and sometimes, making money from protection of the oil companies. A certain problem that arises when such benefits are accrued is that of sharing formula. When this problem arises, one group will break away, buy its own weapons and begins to carve an empire for itself. And that is why there was proliferation and emergence of splinter groups [24].

Many of the fighters talked frequently of three persons who they regarded as constituting the parent armed groups from which most of other splinter groups emerged. These are Government Ekpemupulu (Tompson), Asari and Ateke. Very often the reasons for the break-away revolved around loyalty problems, quest for power and domination, greed and desire for settlement after apprenticeship. The patronage-apprenticeship mentality buttresses the point that not all events of fragmentation are violent and quarrelsome. Some are very peaceful with the splinter groups getting the blessing and support of the parent group. For example, Tompolo 'settled' and commissioned General Africa and General Joshua Makaiva both from Ologboibiri community in Southern Ijaw, who served and worked under him to operate in their area [25]. A similar thing can be said of Ateke from whom several strong groups sprang up headed by people like Toboma George – who became very strong and almost equaled Tom Ateke – Fahrad Dagogo, Boy Loaf, Jackri Amakri, Ogun Boss and so on [26].

IV. EGBESU AND THE NARRATIVE OF PROTECTION

It is in a pattern strikingly similar to the magic guerilla in northern Uganda that those involved in the armed struggle in the Niger Delta appealed to religious deity called Egbesu; the Ijaw god of war and justice [27]. It is important as this section points out, that the invocation of spirit media to fight war is the fundamental motivation for the 'Niger Delta' conflict. The inspiration and protection the fighters believed they get from Egbesu is necessary in order to understand the speed and efficiency with which they mobilized for the conflict. Various armed group camps hosted thousands of youths. A respondent who belonged to Asari's NDPVF; and later founded his own group, suggested that Asari's camp could boast of 4000 fighters [28]. They did not care about the possibility of dying as death is not an option. But then, what is this Egbesu really?

There are two ways of understanding Egbesu: namely as an Ijaw social movement or cult and as an Ijaw god of war and justice. Traditionally, Egbesu is a social movement, some sort of a cult into which young Ijaws are initiated to signify their transition into manhood [29]. It is not inherently violent, but rather a part of the Ijaw tradition which even serves as a framework for social control [30] and in the establishment of a code of conduct for members at the point of initiation and oath taking [31]. Like several other cults in traditional societies across Africa, the Egbesu sect prescribes actions for and regulates the conduct of young men in Ijawland who have successfully passed through the initiation rites. Although not comprehensive, a sample list of these prescriptions might include the prohibition of the following acts: stealing, oppression, injustice, betrayal, sexual intercourse with women experiencing menstruation, eating snail and walking underneath clothes lines [32]. Seen in this regard, the Egbesu cult is, in this context, an influential means of socialization that is ultimately aimed at ensuring stability, peace, law and order in the Ijaw society.

On the other hand, as a deity, Egbesu assumes the position of worship and reverence, with shrines and priests designated to it. Through a fervent act of worship, performance of rituals and strict obedience to its precepts, members of the Egbesu cult (and others not necessarily belonging to the cult) are able to access spiritual protection from Egbesu which makes them invincible especially from sharp objects like machetes and pellets from guns, et cetera. The aspects of worship and protection lead to the conception of Egbesu as a god of war and justice. Although it is an age-long belief, the invocation of the Egbesu spirits for war purposes was already waning until the Warri crisis of 1997 when the "Ijaw youth resuscitated their ancestral arch-deity of war to guide their attacks and order their lives." [33] No doubt, an external observer might have some difficulties understanding the spiritual entity called Egbesu and the power its worshippers ascribe to it. However, among the Ijaws, the deity is believed to have the capability to not only direct them to fight a war against their perceived

enemies and perpetrators of injustice, but also to specify the exact conditions and terms on which they must execute the directive. Sometimes, this involves complete destruction of the community they fight against [34]. Besides referring to Egbesu as the Ijaw god of war and justice, [35] who gives them power, protects them, takes them to war and brings them back, [36] the Ijaws conceive of Egbesu as an angel of God, through whom they get to God [37]. Generally, they symbolize it with a multi-colored piece of cloth (white, red and black) which they tie around their arms, wear as headgear, underpants or as wrappers [38]. According to the account by one of the fighters:

My experiences were centered on shooting and killing people. We would stand face to face with the government forces: their bullets wouldn't go through me, but I shot and killed very many targets during the struggle. My brother, we were protected. We had both physical and spiritual protection. Would you believe that someone could come to you now and use a cutlass on your body unexpectedly and you would incur no injury? Well you see, before we embarked on the armed struggle, we underwent a lot of rituals to prepare ourselves against gun shots and cuts from sharp objects like cutlasses and so on. [39]

Apart from the powerful demonstration of Egbesu during the 1997 Warri crisis, the Ijaws are able to put the efficacy of Egbesu to test in the events following the Kaiama Declaration of late 1998. In the following paragraph, an abridged narration of that aftermath from one of the fighters is reported. With the adoption of the Kaiama Declaration and the emergence of the Ijaw Youth Council (IYC), T. K. Ogoriba, one of the signatories to the declaration, was mobilizing many Ijaw youths in 1999 for peaceful protests against the Nigerian state and the multinational oil companies; with particular emphasis on the demands articulated in the Declaration. Things got out of hand when the government swooped in on the protesters; killing a few, injuring several and arresting Ogoriba, whom Ijaw youth considered a strong voice or epitome of their agitation. News of this repression circulated quite fast, and sooner Ijaw youth from all across the Niger Delta converged again; at first, in Kaiama and then in Oloibiri, to take proactive actions toward the release of their advocate. It is instructive to point out that the youth did not gather with arms and ammunition, but rather with their white cloths mainly from the Egbesu shrine at Amagbulu whose chief priest was King Perekere. Through its priest, according to the narration, Egbesu directed four men to proceed to Kaiama junction and dispossess the policemen on duty of their guns. Furthermore, under the supervision of the priest, four young boys (who were and must be virgins) carried the Egbesu instrument of direction called *Obobo* in Ijaw, literally meaning ladder. Depending on how the *Obobo* turns itself as the boys carried it, Egbesu selected those to proceed to Yenagoa, the seat of government of Bayelsa State to actualize the release of Ogoriba. Although they embarked on the journey using vehicles, they entered Yenagoa on foot having disembarked at the outskirts of the town. Meanwhile, the government, being fully aware of this impending attack, had stationed state security personnel in batches to prevent a breach of peace. But with Egbesu's *Obobo* leading the way followed by the priest and the rest of the youths tying their white cloths, the aggrieved Ijaw youths succeeded in engaging the armed security, dispossessed them of their weapons, forced them to retreat, advanced into government house to secure the release of T. K. Ogoriba [40].

Several other fighters confirmed that this was a critical turning point in the contemporary armed group struggle in the Niger Delta as the victory recorded here testified to the efficacy of Egbesu powers as well as an indicator that their fight was that of justice [41]. Certainly, there were some Ijaw youth who suffered or even lost their lives during this attack but it was believed that those were the youth who joined the procession midway; that they were not part of the initial gathering that was inspected and selected by Egbesu. Although they also tied their white cloths, chances were high that they might have unwittingly violated one or more of Egbesu's principles and as such were not covered by its protection [42]. Citing a national weekly magazine reporting this incidence, Ukeje [43] gave a vivid description of the encounter between government forces and Ijaw youth pointing out that both sides suffered severe casualties. Shortly after this experience, several armed groups emerged appealing to and appropriating the powers of Egbesu as they launched a series of attacks against the Nigerian state and multinational oil companies. Meanwhile, Frynas identifies the use of security measures against protesters such as extra-judicial killings, rapes, arrests and floggings as the most common and frequent strategies used by the government as it seeks to respond to the crisis in the Niger Delta [44]. The use of the military and other state security apparatus to suppress the people of the Niger Delta has been ongoing since the 1990s. But after the return to civilian rule in 1999, the expectations that the government would shun militarization and its tendencies as well as encourage equitable redistribution of power and social justice were not realized. On the contrary, the militarization of the Niger Delta received a boost with the foreclosure of the political space as well as the disempowerment of the citizens to the extent that they could not freely participate in decision making relating to access to power and resource [45].

The point here is that the Ijaw youth have simply recreated an aspect of their culture through which they spiritualize violence and portray themselves as fighters of and for their spirits and gods. Because they are believed to be possessed by the Egbesu spirit, they are entirely absolved from whatever crime or negativity that would have been associated with their actions [46]. The Egbesu spirit purifies them to carry out its dictates of war and this confers the status of justice or 'just war' on the conflict they execute. This is akin to what Ifeka

calls the ‘fetishization’ of violence. The youth mystify or ‘fetishize’ political relations as well as appreciating rituals dedicated to drawing down the divine for empowerment. It allowed them to make meaningful the convulsive political system they live. In a profound sense, this logic propelled them to adopt political violence strategies in order to put forward their agitations towards the state [47]. As a last word, this section has argued that the recreation of the Egbesu culture and the invocation of its spirit which result in the appropriation of its powers of invincibility is a major motivation for massive recruitment into and embrace of armed group violence by the Ijaws of the Niger Delta. By possessing the fighters during warfare, Egbesu spirit absolves them of all responsibilities associated with their actions thereby purifying and converting what would have been acts of criminality (just as their enemies perceive them) to ones that are noble and just in the pursuit of truth, justice and freedom for the entire Ijaw nation.

V. CONCLUSION

In sum, in this paper, I have argued that the recreation of the Egbesu culture and the invocation of its spirit which result to the appropriation of its powers of invincibility and formidability to its adherents is a major motivation for the armed group violence in the Niger Delta. Being the Ijaw god of war and justice, Egbesu commands its followers to fight against perceived enemies, in this case, the Nigerian state and the multinational oil companies as well as dictating the exact procedure for executing the war. By possessing the fighters during warfare, Egbesu spirit absolves them of all responsibilities associated with their actions thereby purifying them and converting what would have been acts of criminality (as their enemies perceive them) to noble and just acts discharged in pursuit of truth, justice and freedom for the entire Ijaw ethnic nationality.

This result significantly challenges the state-of-the-art literature on the ‘Niger Delta’ conflict which hitherto has presented motivations as a mere polarization of greed and grievance, and a few times, a combination of both. Instead of relying on macro statistics and numbers which rarely reflect the actual situation, a qualitative study like this is very rewarding as it provides new insights and understanding of the internal workings, thought-patterns, belief systems and day to day life experiences of societies and how these interweave to form motivations for their actions, even the violent ones.

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The Option of Death, Egbesu and the Narrative of Protection: Empirical Evidence from Ijaw Armed..

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