

Cry My Beloved Ugborodo (Escravos?)

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The title is not new nor is the sentiment. But the humiliation is excruciating and continuous. Ugborodo and its communities are being reduced to Escravos, the SLAVES.

Introduction

Nigeria is on the west coast of Africa stretching from the 4th to the 15th latitude north of the equator. With a population of nearly 120 million people and an area of one-third million square miles, it has by far the largest population of any countries in Africa. Its population density is twice that of mainland United States. It is said that one of every six Africans is a Nigerian. A former British colony, Nigeria became independent on October 1, 1960. For the past four decades, it has been primarily under military dictatorships interposed with a few civilian governments. The current civilian government is a presidential system similar to that in the United States of America.

The Niger River, from which Nigeria derives its name, runs through the country. It is joined by the Benue River, in a Y-shape at the middle of the country. It then flows into the Atlantic Ocean in small tributaries, which form the Niger delta. The Niger delta is said to contain the largest mangrove swamp in the world. Crude oil was discovered in the Niger delta in the 1950's. Nigeria is an active member of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC). With a daily production of over 2 million barrels, Nigeria now derives about 90% of its foreign earnings from crude oil exports.

The Niger Delta also is home to some of the smaller ethnic groups in Nigeria. Since crude oil production began, their lands and rivers have been polluted and they have lost their means of meager livelihood such as fishing and farming. Yet they have acquired very little benefit from the oil wealth that is derived from their territory. This is a diary of a visit to my home, Ugborodo, in the Niger Delta in November of 2000.

Visit Home - Day One

The taxi driver sped through Effurun junction to the new Warri Airport. My ride had been told that I had left already while I was actually in my hotel room waiting for him. In desperation, I chartered this rickety taxi. The driver dropped me at the airport at about 9:30 AM just in time to join the confusion of people struggling to get boarding passes. Dragging my luggage and briefcase along and perspiring profusely, I found the Escravos check-in counter. I stretched my neck through an opening in the queue and shouted, "Do you have a boarding pass for Omatete, Omatete, Dr. Omatete?" The man standing behind the person on the counter looked down the sheet in front of them and announced that all those whose names appeared on the manifest will get boarding passes and that they should wait patiently. He did not quite answer my question so I looked straight at him and as our eyes met, he nodded. That was good enough for me so I waited amid the crowd.

"Welcome, Sir," I heard as someone gently tapped me on the shoulder. I turned round and saw a former student of mine. "Do you remember me, Kayode, your student at UNILAG?"* I certainly remembered the face and the name too and I shook his hand warmly. Kayode was with an oil servicing company and was waiting for a flight to Port Harcourt. Just then, a voice came from over the counter, "Oga, here is your boarding pass. Bring your luggage and let us weigh it." Kayode carried the luggage around the people waiting, to the scale. It was weighed and thrown down along side the others. Kayode and I then went into the temporary terminal building that was air-conditioned but already overcrowded. We squeezed ourselves into one corner and cooled off as Kayode filled me in with news about himself and other former students. He apologized that he did not come to the just-concluded Nigerian Society of Chemical Engineers' (NSChE) meeting because of personal matters.

The door in front of the terminal building opened and a man announced, "Those for the Escravos flight follow me, please." I took my briefcase from Kayode, bade him farewell and joined the rush out of the building. The line swiftly moved past two planes and ended at the third. I boarded the twin-engine propeller plane, probably a 34-seater and sat on the 5th row. During the pre-take-off briefing, I heard that the flight was only about 13 minutes - 13 minutes! That startled me. The plane taxied down the runway and took-off.

I flashed back to my first trip from Ugborodo to Warri when I was about 6 years old. It was by canoe and it took at least 3 days and 2 nights. Finding safety in numbers, we traveled in convoys and rowed and paddled our canoes through rivers and creeks, following the tide and spending the nights in our canoes anchored at villages along the way. By the 1950's when I was in secondary school, transport to the big cities of Warri and Sapele was in huge, built-up canoes with outboard engines called onomatopoeically "kpe-kpe-kpe." Usually the journey took about 8 hours if the kpe-kpe-kpe did not break down. Five years ago when we visited, we went by powerboat locally known as flyboat and the journey from Warri was about 2 hours. Now, only 13 minutes - whoa, how times have changed! But how has Ugborodo changed?

As I strained through the window in search of recognizable landmarks, the attendant announced that we should buckle up in preparation for landing in Escravos - Escravos, the SLAVES, in Portuguese. A few minutes later, we were welcomed to Escravos! Here we were in Ugborodo land and we are being welcomed to the SLAVES. It just did not sound right. But this was not the time to contemplate. With only two days to spend, arrangements had to be made for a place to sleep for the night and how to be ferried to various parts of my home, Ugborodo, made up of islands. The first trip was to the main island of Ugborodo. My kind hosts arranged for a small-flat bottomed boat to drop me.

I asked to be let out at the Arunton primary school jetty. In any case, the tide was too low to go further into the creek towards Ogunuwan or the Ugborodo market waterside or what was left of it. The boat left the Chevron jetty and headed into the wide estuary, then swung right into the creek to Ugborodo and, five minutes later, arrived at the school jetty. I scrambled overboard, with my camera and camcorder over my shoulders, onto the jetty. It was about midday and I told the boat operator to come back for me at 5:00 PM. I turned around to walk onto the school premises. The sight was stunning. A total and absolute state of ruin. The roof of the primary school that was blown away during the unfortunate Ijaw attack was still not replaced. I walked through the school field to the vicinity where my older sister's small house had been. All I saw of what used to be people's dwelling places, their homes, were just the cement floors. As I stood there in total bewilderment, a male voice challenged me.

"What do you want?" he asked in perfect English. I turned around and saw the young man probably in the late teens or early twenties sitting on a bench in the

shade provided by the roof of an uncompleted house. He wore a sleeveless singlet over his trousers, his sandals unbuckled and a shirt thrown over his left shoulder. He did not wait for a reply and in a more aggressive mood, continued. "You newsmen come and take pictures and write all the articles in the paper, but nothing has changed. We still have no houses, no jobs and we are hungry." I added in my mind "and probably very angry too." In a low voice and very slowly, I spoke in Itsekiri and told him that I was definitely not a newsman and was visiting my home. His countenance changed. I asked whether he knew which of the cement ruins around was my sister's house.

He did not. But a lady sitting by a tiny kiosk in front of a house a few yards away shouted out. "You are standing right by it." I looked down at the little bare cement floor. I remember visiting with my wife five years ago and my sister apologizing for the cramped, small house but very excited to see us as she scrambled to prepare us food. I took off my camcorder to videotape the scene but it was jammed. I checked everything in the camcorder but it was still jammed. Completely disappointed, for by now, several young men and children had come out to watch me and I had wanted to video them too. But my old reliable camcorder failed today. After a few snapshots with my camera, I walked to the shade where my young challenger was sitting. Despite the commotion around him, he had not moved from his spot in the shade. He looked up; saw my eyes red and teary, and slowly moved to make room for me on the bench. I sat down by him and dropped my camcorder on the ground and shook my head. Being slightly superstitious, I thought that the gods did not want me to have a permanent image of this painful sight hence the camcorder failed. This horrible image I have now would fade with time and there will be nothing to play back and recall it. When I raised my head, the people had moved towards me. They had accepted me as one of theirs and we conversed freely in Itsekiri.

"Why are you not in school?" I asked the children. Before anybody answered, I realized my folly. "I know, I know, there is no school." But one of the children said, "You can go to school, if your parents can pay." I was told that a lady had started a private school complete with school uniform, but to attend that school, you had to pay. Given the circumstances, I was fascinated by my people's indomitable spirit and sense of enterprise. But, nearly two years after the unfortunate attack, should government not have rehabilitated the school for the education of our children? I asked the young adults about their education and what they were doing. Many had secondary school education and said they would have

gone further if they had sponsorship. Some were jobless, a few worked at the oil terminal and others were in transit. I told them that I had come from the USA to visit home. And that, after a brief rest, would try to walk slowly towards the main village of Ugborodo. They said it would be a very arduous walk in the heat and humidity, and that I would not make it back until late at night. Then, I realized that I had forgotten how far Ugborodo was from Arunton.

To my surprise the young man sitting next to me, who had said nothing until now, volunteered to take me on his motorcycle. I shall call him Temi. Temi got up went around two houses and rolled up his rather small motorcycle. He said he would go fetch some fuel from an Ilaje man at one of the jetties. He hurried off and came back in a few minutes with fuel for the bike. After a few hard kicks, the bike started very roughly at first, but smoothened out. He motioned me to climb on behind him. I did and after arranging my now useless camcorder and camera around to my back, I grabbed onto Temi as the bike jerked forward. I asked him to take me to the house of my cousin, John, who was shot in the head during the attack. He knew his place. We stopped at the remains of John's house. Like the other houses, it was still in shambles. I would have liked to visit John's remains too at his grave. But I knew that was impossible on this trip. Next, I asked Temi to take me to the Eghare-Aja, one of the titular personalities in Ugborodo community. I knew the current holder of the title quite well. He was my contemporary. We grew up in the village together, although he is a few years older.

Temi knew the Eghare-Aja's house and maneuvered through the paths toward it. We rode through the beach and then into the bushes. Sometimes, I thought we would fall into the streamlets as the motorcycle wobbled through the tiny planks that bridged them. Finally he pulled up amongst a group of houses, rather isolated. I knew that we were no longer in Arunton but had not arrived at Ugunwan, the beginning of Ugborodo proper. After I dismounted from his bike, he directed me to a relatively large house. Children were around already attracted by the noise of the bike. I walked to an adult standing on the verandah and asked to see the Eghare-Aja. He made me wait outside and went into the main door of the house. After a rather long wait, a man came out and introduced himself as the secretary to the Eghare-Aja and asked who I was and why I wanted to see him. I was taken aback by the caution and suspicion. But given the recent events, it was understandable. Satisfied with my answers, he went back and soon came out and ushered me into the house. He offered me a chair and I sat. I looked around the room and saw some very elderly people around whom I did not recognize. I greeted them politely and

waited. A few minutes later the Eghare-Aja came from the inner room to the living room where I sat. He seemed to have changed his clothes hurriedly. Once he looked up and recognized me, he hurried towards me and I to him. As we met, we hugged.

"Doctor, Doctor," he shouted as he greeted me. "Doh, Do-oh.* It has been a while since I saw you. Where are you coming from?" I explained that I had come from America (USA) to visit home. "Don't you see now? This is somebody who comes all the way from America to visit us here at home. Yet, those of them in Lagos or even Warri seldom come home." He said as he walked round the room introducing me to everybody. Some remembered my dad who passed on nearly five decades ago. All know my sister at Arunton whose house was bombed. After that he asked what I would drink. But immediately added, "Eh, Doctor does not take hot drink,"* and sent a boy to buy some soft drinks. Then he went to his room and brought the pictures we took when he visited Lagos when I taught at UNILAG. We reminisced over those days and the Ugborodo of our youth as we sipped the warm soft drinks.

There was a gentle tap on the door. We looked up and there was Temi at the door. In all the excitement I had forgotten he was out there. I felt really bad, invited him in and requested a drink for him. He took the drink, whispered to me that it was getting late and politely left the room. Temi amazed me again, not only was he my guide but he had become my timekeeper too. I sought the Eghare-Aja's opinion about continuing onto Ugborodo itself. He looked despondent as he wondered aloud, "What is there to see or visit? All of Ugborodo is gone, both the land and the people". We did not talk much about the immediate past for it was too depressing neither about the present, nor the future of Ugborodo which both look gloomy.

Heeding Temi's advice, I knew it was time to head back to Arunton. I got up, walked around the room, paid obeisance to the elderly and headed for the door. The Eghare-Aja wanted a book on Itsekiri history that was long out of print. I promised to search for it. He then walked me out. Temi started the bike and I mounted behind. After waving to those around, we took off.

Temi dropped me at the field of the Arunton primary school. I thanked the young man profusely and gave him some money as a token of my appreciation. Instead of going straight to the jetty to wait since it was just 4:45 PM, I walked past the school premises to other side of Arunton almost opposite the Chevron compound.

It was a ghost town. Only few people were to be seen around the bombed-out houses. Five years ago when we visited, this was a beehive of activities. There were all types of people: traders with goods displayed in front of their stores, hawkers with an assortment of wares and food, goldsmiths fashioning gold wares for men and women, all vying for our attention as we meandered along the paths between the houses. The selling and buying continued across the estuary to just outside the Chevron fence for this was where many workers inside the oil terminal lived. Now all the people and the economic power they provided for the village are gone. The oil boom has doomed the village. I walked back to the jetty just as the boat to pick me was pulling up.

Day Two

The second day started early. After a quick breakfast, I was ferried across the estuary and dropped at the Shell jetty in Madangho. They would come for me at noon. I scampered up the jetty and walked towards what used to be a small hospital built for the community by Chevron Oil Company. It still had its roof caved in from the bombing. Since I had abandoned my camcorder, I took my camera out to take a few snapshots.

No sooner had I clicked one or two shots than a young man ran out shouting, "Give me that camera!" repeatedly. He was bare-footed, wearing a singlet over khaki shorts. He asked in pidgin, "Who gee you permission to take pictures? You no see say dis nah govment building?" I replied in Itsekiri that I was just visiting home and did not know that the hospital had become a government building. He walked briskly towards me demanding my camera. I stood my ground unwilling to surrender my camera to him. In any case, there was nothing to indicate it was a government building and I know of no law that says government buildings cannot be photographed. Meanwhile, three young men walking by saw us, and intervened. One asked the officious man, "OC, wetin be the problem?" Another told me in Itsekiri that the man was one of the soldiers guarding the destroyed hospital. The young men apparently knew the soldier well and soon he let me go with a warning not to repeat such action.

I accompanied them as we walked off. They told me that the soldiers were there to protect what was left of the hospital and that troops were stationed there during the initial Ijaw attack. But those soldiers, they said, ran into the bushes and did nothing to defend the village and the hospital. They were probably surprised, and

outnumbered, I suggested. We walked round to what was left of Madangho compared to what I knew, over half a century ago, as a boy. I could not believe how much of it was eroded, lost to the sea. I asked to be shown the proposed site of the New Ugborodo, which I knew was just behind Madangho. They pointed ahead to the open area overgrown with bushes. There was no sign of activity on it. Five years ago when we visited, it was white with sand pouring onto it from dredgers anchored in the Madangho creek. Since that time, apparently nothing has happened. I told them that I wanted to visit the villages around, and wondered if transportation was available.

We walked back to the Shell jetty. A little distance from the beach were sheds where women sold food and I noticed there were uniformed soldiers around carrying automatic weapons. There were a couple of medium sized motorcycles parked around. These were Okadas, the Nigerian motorcycle taxis that have become a fixture since the late 1980s and early 1990s. I engaged one of them after I ensured the owner was a local and knew the place and the people, because he was going to be my guide. From the jetty, Shell has built an asphalt road to one of its flow stations about 12 miles away. Close by, bulldozers were moving huge rocks, probably left there over 3 decades ago by Costain,* in preparation for further construction. We took off on the tarred road, went past Obogboro, Ajaudaibo, and several small encampments on the way. The asphalt road veered off to the flow station and we went on a path into Ogidigben. I asked my guide to take me to the village elder in Ogidigben. Although, it was November and the rainy season was over, most of the roads and paths were still water laden. We splashed and weaved through the paths until we arrived at the elder's house.

He was an old man and I did not get too much information from him. I gave him some money and he prayed for me and I left. The next stop was at the Ogidigben secondary school. I did not want to meet the people on this visit, as the time was short and there was so much to tell the teachers and, especially, the students. I would reserve that for another visit. I just wanted to see the building and the premises. My guide drove me there and I took a few shots. There were basically two long buildings and a couple of small ones with an overgrown field, a typical village secondary school. As I looked at the buildings, I realized that the future of the Ugborodo people lies in those classrooms - in the education of its people. For I believe it is only good education that will rescue us from the quagmire of self-destructive counterclaims. But this was not the time to explore that.

Next we drove towards the nearby, old Costain buildings, which, according to my guide, were supposed to serve as temporary offices of the new local government headquarters at Ogidigben. These desolate and decrepit buildings are to be renovated as Local Government Authority headquarters! In any case, the placement of the headquarters here has been controversial. It seems nothing comes easy to our people here, the minority amongst minorities in Nigeria.

I looked forward to the next stop with some anxiety. It is one thing that remained with me no matter where I have been. The image of the bright light sweeping, rotating, and flashing across from Ogidigben over the wide estuary to Ugborodo all night, filled my adolescent mind with awe. At last, we arrived at the lighthouse. A structure like a television tower with a large conical lamp at the top, it looked smaller than I had envisioned. I had never actually visited it. I stopped and took pictures. I had thought it was right on the beach. It is now actually some distance from the beach. The area around it was water-logged and the large NPA* sign on it was fading. It reminded me of everything about Ugborodo. Yet, this lighthouse must have a future in Ugborodo's survival and revival. There was a small encampment around it and I tried to talk to the people living there. They were too young to remember its glory days when the lighthouse beacons hope to the ships that dared to cross the Ugborodo bar and ventured to the inland ports of Sapele, Warri and the others.

It was near noon and my ride would soon come for me at the jetty. We took off onto the tarred road. After a few miles, as we passed a group of houses, a soldier stopped us and asked to ride with us into Madangho. We could not refuse. With his automatic rifle on his back pointing to the sky, he squeezed on, pushing me tightly against the motorcycle operator. In less than ten minutes, we were at what looked like a military checkpoint just before the road entered into the open area around the Shell jetty. The soldier disembarked, insisted on and actually paid the operator for the ride. As we continued towards the jetty area, I asked my guide if the soldiers always paid. He said these new ones under the civilian government did; but previous groups just ordered people to take them wherever they were going. And they had no choice but to obey.

I paid him generously for his time and bike and walked to the jetty. There were several young men and women waiting, all sitting at various rungs of a Shell-built water tower, which provided some shelter. I joined and spoke with many of them. Some were waiting for the boat to travel to Warri; a few were shift workers with

the various oil and oil-servicing companies waiting for the boat to take them to their work. A majority of them, like those in Ugborodo, had completed secondary school education and were looking for jobs while hoping to further their education. You could sense that they felt their future was bleak and were angry. I took pictures of the people and the surroundings.

I sat back on a comfortable rung so that I was looking directly across at the Chevron terminal and enjoyed the sea breeze blowing from the Atlantic. It was a clear day. I looked over the estuary to the left into the Atlantic Ocean and saw several platforms around various oilfields flaring gas. Gone for several decades now, are those endless rows of hardwood poles that lined the estuary, which were used for crayfishing. Across the estuary was the Chevron terminal with storage tanks from which thousands of barrels of crude oil are exported daily. Across the creek to the right of the Chevron terminal, there was a new source flaring some gas too, the Escravos Gas Plant Phase one. A phase two is to follow. I know that the land and swamp around is full of wells and pipelines carrying crude oil to other terminals for export. Yet the people are poor and miserable.

I thought about small countries with similar natural resources like Kuwait or Bahrain, enjoying a very high standard of living. I do not blame the system we have. I only wish that the rulers in Nigeria will find a way to develop these areas that have provided the country's wealth, before the wealth is used up, the areas discarded, and the people thrown into the dustbin of Nigerian history. One only prays and hopes that rulers that consider this a priority will emerge sooner rather than later. Right now, the future of my people is bleak.

It is noon. Lost in my thoughts, I had not seen the boat for me coming until it was quite close to the jetty. I lowered myself from the rung and walked to the jetty. It was ebb tide and I had to be careful in descending into the boat. I successfully made it to the boat and we pushed off. Back at the terminal but before I went for lunch, I insisted that my host ensure that I was confirmed to leave on the flight to Lagos that afternoon. I did not want to spend the night there because my vacation time in Nigeria was nearly over. He checked with the terminal manager and was assured that I would be on that flight. We went for a late lunch. I talked to some Ugborodo workers at the terminal and then went for my luggage.

The small terminal at the airstrip was already crowded when we got there. It was the day when the people changed shifts, some coming in to resume work and

others leaving for home. Furthermore, there were special auditors from Lagos on that day, who came in a small seaplane. Everybody, it seems was at the terminal trying to get the all-important boarding pass. I waited anxiously as boarding passes were given to people in some order. Finally, I got mine and my luggage was weighed in.

After a short wait, we boarded and I took a window seat. The plane took off and headed first over the Atlantic and soon turned to follow the coastline. The water line along the beach was clearly visible all the way for this short, less than an hour's flight to Lagos. I had flown this route several times and always wondered how convenient it would be to have a coastal highway from Lagos to Warri and Ugborodo. It could be part of the East-West coastal highway across Nigeria. Does Ogun State extend to the Atlantic Ocean, I wondered?

We landed in Lagos and the plane taxied a long way to the local terminal. A ride was waiting for me. I picked up my luggage and we drove off into the nightmarish traffic that is unique to Lagos. I tried to catch up on what happened since I left but finding this impossible, decided to settle down in back seat of the car, and let myself ride through the hustle and bustle of Lagos.

What a Week!

That evening, after dinner, as I sat idly at the table, my mind went over all the events of the past week. As an economic migrant to the US, whenever I accumulate enough vacation time to visit home, there are two activities I attend to, besides visiting families and friends. The first is the annual general meeting (AGM) of the Nigerian Society of Chemical Engineers (NSChE) and the other is the visit to my birth village, Ugborodo. I have been associated with the Society for well over a quarter of century, almost at its inception. This year was the 30th AGM. Not only was the meeting's venue at Warri, my peoples' home, but also the current president was my schoolmate and brother, Engr.* Chief J. J. Akpieyi, for Itsekiris are so few that they are almost all invariably related. I knew I had to be in Warri.

I had hoped that this meeting would not be as troubling as the last one I attended five years ago, the 25th AGM in Owerri. At the end of that meeting, we heard that Ken Saro Wiwa had just been hanged in nearby Port Harcourt prison despite international pleas to spare his life. That set off a scramble to get out of Owerri.

Airfares, which had been negotiated already, were increased. You had to bribe to get a boarding pass. Even then, to be assured of a seat, you had to run onto the tarmac dragging your luggage along. I remembered running with my luggage, tripping over it, and deciding to carry it on my head as I ran onto the plane. Times have changed and Warri would certainly be easier to get to and from, you would think. Not that easy.

I decided to travel by road from Lagos since I was taking a few things home. We had successfully navigated the treacherous, dilapidated so-called dual carriage way from Lagos especially the dangerous Ogun State section through Edo State into Delta. We were a few miles from Warri on the Sapele-Warri road when we ran into a traffic jam. Some vehicles were turning back, others going through the bushes. The new menace in the Delta had struck again. One of the bridges in the road had caught fire. The fire was allegedly caused when fuel from a burst oil pipeline ran into the creek under the bridge and was ignited. Fortunately, in the nearby bush, there was a portion of an abandoned four-lane highway that was to link Benin and Warri. We followed the long line to get to it and finally made it to Warri.

I recall how successful the meeting on "The Management of Environment, Health and Safety in Nigeria" had been. Both the federal and state governments sent representatives; the papers were interesting and the discussions stimulating. On the last day, as the meeting came to a close, just before the election of the new board of executives, the President asked for permission to make a brief statement. Engr. Akpieyi said he wanted to thank a member who had come all the way from the USA to attend the meeting, who was a year his senior at Government College Ughelli and who, because he studied chemical engineering, he, Akpieyi, gravitated to the same field. Embarrassed and unprepared, I stood to acknowledge the cheers.

Engr. Professor Ayo Ogunye, my colleague at the Chemical Engineering Dept, UNILAG, at its inception and for nearly one and half decades, past President of and a very active Fellow of NSChE, and now a successful business man, stood to explain the election procedure. He mentioned how, during the early days of the Society, he and I, then National Secretary, sensing a possible divisive fight over elections, worked tirelessly through the night urging some nominees to withdraw or run for other offices. Those negotiations led to the current harmonious election procedure embodied in our constitution. I felt relatively old but gratified to have my little role mentioned. The meeting ended with a dinner hosted by the Warri Refinery whose current manager, Dr. Ayangbile, was my student at the UNIFE.*

Meeting and talking to him and to many others of my students who now occupy prominent positions in chemical and petrochemical departments in universities, industry and government, I felt fulfilled as a teacher.

Still sitting at the dinner table in Lagos, my thoughts flashed to Ugborodo, my home. First, I recalled the wonderful lunch I had in Warri with Mr. J. O. S. Ayomike, a commissioner in the former Bendel State and an eminent and well-published Itsekiri historian as well as active and committed son of Ugborodo. We had a long discussion especially about the divisions in the Ugborodo community and how they can be bridged. I recalled the flight into Ugborodo, the abject poverty amidst the wealth of oil and gas. My heart sank. I got up, walked upstairs and lay in bed. In bed, my mind churned and mulled over the events that I witnessed over these couple of days. The misery, the poverty, the bombed-out houses, school and hospital, the erosion of the land, finally the lost identity - Ugborodo is now Escravos, the Slaves. Even sons and daughters of Ugborodo now refer to it as Escravos! Tears formed in my eyes. I cried for Ugborodo. In another generation Ugborodo will be forgotten, replaced by Escravos.

Brief History of Ugborodo

But Ugborodo has a rich history. It was alleged to have been founded by Ijebu fishermen who came to settle in the area. Two brothers and their five sons fanned out to form the various communities of Ugborodo. Hence we refer to ourselves as "Ikperere ale meje - Ikperere (Ugborodo) of seven sections". Ugborodo was a thriving community with its own ruler, Olaja-ori, before the famed movement of the Iwere (Itsekiri) royal family from the Benin royal family over 500 years ago. The Portuguese had a settlement both in Warri and in the island of Ugborodo in 1588. In late 19th century, the French built a salt factory in Ugborodo. When the British arrived and learnt about this, they threw a party for all the people and during that party the factory was mysteriously blown off and so was the French presence in what became Nigeria.

Ugborodo literally means "Dry land in the Sea" and it was a huge island. I recall my grandmother describing how dangerous it was to move from the village to the beach after dark because large cats (probably leopards) and dangerous animals prowled at night. If they had to, people moved in a large group. I remember the Ugborodo I grew up in, with a large silk cotton tree (egungun) in its center, towering over all other trees and its huge buttress roots serving as gathering place

for village elders especially during the secret masquerading season. We had to walk a long distance to get to the beach where canoes were loaded with conical nets used to catch crayfish. The village had mango trees that fruited abundantly annually to the joy of the youth. Edible fruits were everywhere in the bushes and palm fruits were harvested from there to prepare our delicious fresh crayfish banga* soups. These are all gone now along with my childhood house and neighborhood, which are at least half a kilometer in the Atlantic Ocean.

The estuary by Ugborodo was the entrance to the Delta ports. Ships had to change pilots here before they crossed the bar. The Nigerian pilots, usually Ijaws, were ferried from Ogidigben to the ships anchored at sea. These skilful pilots took the ships across the bar. Even then one or two ran aground especially if they tried to maneuver in the deep fog. Thus, in the 1950's and 60's, the lighthouse and the breakwater were built on the Ogidigben side of the estuary to facilitate navigation. That was the beginning of the end of Ugborodo mainland. The breakwater turned the fury of the sea into the erosion of Ugborodo, which continues to date unabated. Ugborodo is less than a quarter of the land I remember.

The 1950s brought another set of people, seismic exploration teams of the Shell-BP Company. They set off explosives; houses in the village shook and vibrated. The people did not know what was going on. In their superstition, they believed these foreigners were after huge reptiles that were said to protect diamonds and other precious metals. Little did they realize how correct they were. It was, indeed, something precious they found, it was liquid and black, oil. The whole area sits on oil and gas whether on land or on sea. Billions of barrels of oil have been exported yielding trillions of naira to the Nigerian coffer.

Ugborodo and the Oil Boom

What about the Ugborodo people, what have they received from the oil boom? First was the pollution always associated with oil exploration. The crayfish beds that provided livelihood and economic sustenance for the people disappeared. I wonder if dolphins (ubeje) that frolicked at full tide in the estuary in my youth still appear. What about the occasional manatee (ese), do they still exist? Second was the expropriation of the land with meager compensation that has sent the people into warring camps. Third, extreme poverty amidst the affluence in the rest of Nigeria brought on by the huge oil revenue. Fourth, all the oil jobs, from the highest to the lowest positions somehow, never seemed to come their way. The list

continues. But worst and most damning is the surreptitious loss of their identity from Ugborodo to Escravos, the slaves!

So what do the Ugborodo people want from the oil companies and the governments of Nigeria? Nearly two years after the attack, should houses not have been rebuilt or, in particular, the school building renovated so that the children can get back to school? The hospital took over a decade of negotiations before it was constructed, should it not have been restored two years after it was bombed instead of keeping soldiers to protect its carcass? The people need jobs and education. The building of a new Ugborodo has been discussed for at least a decade. The site was sand-filled five years ago. When will the new Ugborodo be built? Let those planning it not forget that a town has to be economically sustainable and its peoples' history need to be preserved. But whatever else is done, please, give the Ugborodo people back their name. Ugborodo is not Escravos, the Slaves

Is it not shocking that while the late Nigerian president-elect, Chief Abiola led the campaign for reparation for slavery and the United Nations is to hold a conference on racism, slavery and reparations in South Africa, where Nigeria, the former Slave Coast, will be represented, that we still call a river in Nigeria, Escravos, the Slaves? There is no doubt that thousands, if not millions, of Nigerians went down that river to fuel the European slave trade that built America. But should we still keep its disgraceful Portuguese name? I know as a child when we plied the river, we never called it Escravos, but called the river by its various local names.

This much all sons and daughters of the greater Ugborodo must request immediately. Give us back our name and our identity. Why is an oil terminal or a gas plant or an airstrip or any other installation on our land being called Escravos, the Slaves? Please stop this humiliation and degradation. Whatever it takes, change the name to Ugborodo now.

Glossary

UNILAG - University of Lagos

Doh, Do-oh - Greeting among the Itsekiri, Bini, and other people of the Niger Delta.

hot drink - Hard liquor.

Costain - A construction company.

NPA - Nigerian Ports Authority.

Engr. - Abbreviation for Engineer.

UNIFE - University of Ife, now Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile Ife.

Banga soup -- Soup made from palm fruits.

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