

# Niger Delta Women And Democratic Transition In Nigeria, 1985 – 1993.

ATEI MARK OKOROBIA

History and Diplomatic Studies Department

Faculty of Humanities University of Port Harcourt, Rivers State Nigeria

## Abstract

The call for women empowerment in Nigerian history had never been as thunderous as it was during the heyday of Mrs Maryam Babangida, the then First Lady of Nigeria, and indeed, Nigeria's most visible First Lady. Prompted largely by her initiative, major transformations were made in the political role of women in Nigeria. This paper assesses the inputs of some Niger Delta women towards the building of the aborted Third Republic between 1985 and 1993, usually tagged the "Babangida era". For our present purpose the term 'Niger Delta' has been used to cover the defunct Rivers State, which has since 1996 come to be known as Rivers and Bayelsa States.

**Key Words:** Women, empowerment, Nigeria, First Lady, transformations, political, Niger Delta, Third Republic, "Babangida era", Rivers and Bayelsa States.

## I Introduction

The call for women empowerment in Nigerian history had never been as thunderous as it was during the heyday of Mrs Maryam Babangida, the then First Lady of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, and indeed, Nigeria's most visible First Lady. Before then, much of the talks about women empowerment, be it economic empowerment, social recognition or political inclusion, was largely left in the domain of civil societies, particularly foreign-based civil societies and equal opportunity movements. Prominent among such groups were the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), the International Federation of Women Lawyers and various anti-slavery organizations.

Prompted largely by the initiative of Mrs. Babangida, major transformations were made in the political role of women in Nigeria. Unlike her predecessors in office whose presence was scarcely noticed beyond the walls the state house, except perhaps, on special days and ceremonies, Mrs. Babangida introduced into Nigeria's public life, a dynamic and flamboyant office of the "First Lady", far different from what Nigerians were used to. This paper assesses the inputs of some Niger Delta women towards the building of the aborted Third Republic between 1985 and 1993, usually tagged the "Babangida era". This also tallies with the period in which Mrs. Babangida held sway. For our present purpose the term 'Niger Delta' has been used to cover the defunct Rivers State, which has since 1996 come to be known as Rivers and Bayelsa States.

## II. The Political Bureau

The Political Bureau was inaugurated on January 13, 1986 at Abuja by Nigeria's military President General, Ibrahim B. Babangida, and given a wide mandate to conduct a national debate. The aim was to produce a blue-print for a new political model, as well as a realistic implementation programme for the agreed model.

Although no Rivers or Bayelsa woman was appointed into the membership of the Political Bureau, the women of these states co-operated with the Bureau throughout the duration of its task. This was not surprising. With the then President of the National Council of Women Societies (N.C.W.S), Mrs Hilda Adefarasin as a member of the Bureau, most women groups in the Niger Delta were naturally primed to identify with her, collectively and individually. In particular, when the Bureau commissioned the N.C.W.S. to write and present a special paper titled "*Women in Nigerian Development*," the views of Rivers and Bayelsa women were taken into account. Again, when the Women in Nigeria (W.I.N), another feminist organization, was given a similar task by the Bureau to contribute a paper on the topic: "*Women in Nigerian Political Development*," the women of these States equally made their input to enrich the contents of that paper. Added to these, many female associations in the rural areas also responded to the call by the Bureau and organized public discussions on topics of interest to them. It is apparent, therefore, that though at this stage, much of their contributions were in areas that impinged on them as women, the Rivers and Bayelsa women did not, on the whole, lag behind their counterparts in other states of the federation in generating the ideas that were to form the basis of the Bureau's recommendations.

On March 27, 1987, when the Bureau submitted its reports to government, it made a series of recommendations bordering on women, the implementation of which positively affected the lives of women, and enhanced their level of contribution towards the building of the Third Republic. The Bureau had, for instance, called for full involvement of women in politics, because it found this to be one method of defending and promoting women's interest in society. The Federal Government on its part, responded positively to this call and, in translating it into reality, many Niger Delta women, including those of Rivers and Bayelsa extraction,

came to be appointed into several national institutions like the Directorate for Social Mobilization (MAMSER), the National Electoral Commission (NEC), and the Constitution Review Committee (CRC). Others were the Constituent Assembly (CA), the Centre for Democratic Studies (CDS), and the political parties, all of which played significant roles in the political transition programme.

### III. The Mass Mobilization Campaigns

On July 25<sup>th</sup>, 1987 when the MAMSER Directorate was inaugurated, for example, many Rivers and Bayelsa people were happy to find their daughter, Miss Gloria Fiofori, an articulate broadcaster with the old Rivers State Broadcasting Corporation, appointed as Director, to head this mass mobilization apparatus of government in the state. As the chief mobiliser, Miss Fiofori and her field personnel, the Social Mobilisation Officers, (SMOs), a sizeable percentage of which were also women, traversed the nooks and crannies of the two states, not only to educate all strata of the populace on the various stages and aspects of the political transition programme, but also to make the citizenry see the need to cooperate with both the government and non-governmental organizations at the national, state and local government levels. The ultimate goal was to lay a more virile socio-economic foundation that could sustain the Third Republic.

### IV. The Constitution Review Committee and Constituent Assembly

While the women of Rivers and Bayelsa States were still basking in the euphoria of the appointment of Miss Fiofori as the old Rivers State MAMSER Director, another daughter of the Niger Delta, Mrs Rose Obuoforibo, a political science lecturer at the University of Port Harcourt, was appointed into the membership of the Constitution Review Committee on September 1, 1987. Reacting to her appointment, Mrs. Obuoforibo said, that even though she was not expecting it:

*...I knew it was not a wrong choice because, I have the relevant skill. That time, I was a lecturer in political science at University of Port Harcourt, and this was a purely technical job, and when we got there, we saw that majority of the members were lawyers and political science lecturers. So I knew, I was at home... the choice was apt (Oduenyi, 1990).*

Opinions are unanimous that Mrs Obuoforibo's performance in the CRC was highly impressive. So impressive was her role that her re-appointment into the Constituent Assembly was in no way surprising to many observers. Mrs Obuoforibo was, therefore, one of the few CRC members who found their way into the CA largely on meritorious grounds.

The fact that she was appointed into both the CRC and CA on merit, and obviously to protect government and women interests, did not, in any way, make her oblivious of the peculiar developmental challenges and aspirations of the Niger Delta people, especially the Rivers and Bayelsa people. On the platforms of both the CRC and CA, therefore, according to her:

*I was ... one of the people who were vocal in calling attention to enshrining the derivative principle of revenue sharing in the constitution (Oduenyi, 1990).*

In this regard, we would add that Mrs. Obuoforibo was not alone. Miss Fiofori of the MAMSER Directorate also exhibited a similar spirit. While she was appointed basically to be the mouth-piece of the Babangida administration in the old Rivers State, she did not forget to identify areas of peculiar needs of the State, and to make effort at mitigating some of the problems arising from such areas. Before the CA membership elections, for instance, Miss Fiofori directed her Social Mobilisation Officers to mount political enlightenment campaigns among the councilors in their respective local government areas. The aim was to ensure that only patriotic and competent representatives emerged. It was also to ensure that the elections were peaceful, free and fair. The fact that at the end of the exercise, no cases of anti-democratic practices were reported indicates that the directorate's efforts under her leadership were largely successful.

Again, before the Rivers and Bayelsa States' CA members departed for their national assignment, Miss Fiofori organized a one-day workshop to enlighten them. At the workshop, most of the papers presented were tailored to address issues that directly and strongly affected the interest of the Niger Delta. Such issues included the application of the derivative principle in revenue allocation, the minority question and, the need for the old Rivers delegates to exhibit a sense of unity of purpose while contributing towards the making of the 1989 constitution, the document expected to serve as the legal foundation of the Third Republic. It is against this backdrop that we can adequately appreciate the role played by Mrs. Obuoforibo in the CA, for placing much emphasis on the need for the principle of derivation to be enshrined in the constitution.

## V. The December 12, 1987 Non-Party Local Government Elections

This was the first electoral exercise in the transition programme. The Rivers and Bayelsa women, both those who were involved in the active politics of the Third Republic, and those who, as government employees and agents, were merely working to ensure the successful execution of the transition programme, saw this election as a challenge and as an opportunity to test-run the ideas the government of the day was experimenting on. They wanted to demonstrate that under the new dispensation, they were a force to be reckoned with. And so for the women working as staff of the transition agencies, such as the MAMSER Directorate and N.E.C., vigorous political enlightenment campaigns became their major preoccupation. The campaigns were mounted both at both the state, local government and ward levels. In the former Bori and Yenagoa Local Government Areas, for example, Mrs. Sarah Ntor-ue and Rev. (Ms) Irene Buseri, respectively, were particularly zealous in executing their assignments. Taking cues from the Director of MAMSER in the old Rivers State, Miss Fiofori, they organized mini-rallies in their respective local government areas. At each rally, they enlightened the people on the importance of the elections, advising them to vote for candidates of proven integrity and transparent honesty, while shunning politics of money, bitterness and rancour.

Again, for the women who were involved in active politics, the local council elections provided ample opportunities. Like their male counterparts, most of them went round their wards canvassing for votes, and making promises they felt they could redeem, if elected. In the old Degema Local Government Area (DELGA), for example, Miss Anjuba Oruambo won as a councilor, while in the former Brass Local Government (BALGA), Adeline Opuene was similarly elected as the very first female councilor in the history of the area. Furthermore, in the Bonny Local Government Area (OLGA), Mrs Justinah Uku (nee Webber), won election into the council and was consequently appointed a Supervisor for Health and Women Affairs.

## VI. The Formation of the Defunct Political Associations.

Time and other constraints had prevented the N.E.C from conducting the 1987 local government elections on party basis. This was contrary to the recommendations of the Political Bureau and the Federal Government's stand on elections during and after the transition period. To perform its constitutional role properly, therefore, NEC gave the green-light to members of the political class to start forming political associations, and to seek for formal recognition as political parties.

Nationality, thirteen political associations emerged from the crowd of associations that had earlier toyed with the idea of seeking government recognition. In most of these associations, Niger Delta women were among the foundation members. In the Nigerian National Convention (NNC), for instance, we had Mrs Taribio Iwobi and Rose Obuoforibo. The latter was to consequently earn the office of the leader of the Women's Wing of the association. At the local level, we also had some dynamic women, such as Mrs. Remi D. Kuku (who played an identical role to that of Mrs Obuoforibo) in the former Brass Local Government Area.

Mrs. Obuoforibo was, as a matter of fact, quite categorical on why she took her political career so seriously. According to her:

*After reviewing the constitution at the Constitution Review Committee, and moving to the Constituent Assembly debating its provisions, I just knew that I won't stop there, that I will want to implement those laudable and noble provisions that we inserted after a thorough debate (Oduenyi, 1990).*

And so, for women such as Mrs Obuoforibo who had developed the ambition, not only to participate in politics, but also to be in a position to translate their political dreams into reality, they could not afford to watch their male counterparts forming the political associations and parties all alone. They feared that such a passive attitude could deny them much of the influence they would later need, to determine the direction of party policies and programme. Thus, from her CRC and CA days, Mrs. Obuoforibo had taken very active part in the various formal and informal contacts by members of the political class which preceded the formation of the officially recognized political associations.

May 3, 1989 was a very significant day in the political calendar of the transition programme. This was the day President Babangida, in an official broadcast, lifted the ban on partisan politics, and enjoined Nigerians interested in the politics of the Third Republic to:

*move out as from today to join others and enlist the support of like-minded people in the formation of political associations (Babangida, 1989).*

Many Niger Delta women were already aware of who and who they would work with to realize their political dreams. For the politically more conscious and active ones like Mrs. Taribio Iwobi, Mrs. Remi D. Kuku, Mrs. Obuoforibo, Chief (Mrs.) Zainab Ibitein Duke Diете-Spiff (the *Akasoba* of Bakana), and Mrs. Gina Yeseibo,

they already had their bearings. Reports indicate that while Mrs Evangeline I. G. Hart, Mrs Obuoforibo, and Mrs Kuku were active in establishing the presence of the Liberal Convention (LC) and the NNC, associations with capitalist inclinations, Chief (Mrs.) Diete-Spiff and Mrs. Yeseibo were quite active in setting up some of the socialist- oriented associations.

In spite of all their efforts at building up their political associations to secure the Government's recognition, however, none of them was registered. The reasons for their non-registration included factionalism; rigging and falsification of claims; disregard of the guidelines for registration; their strong links with the First and Second Republics' political parties; and the overbearing influence of the 'money bags' in most of them. In place of these political associations, the Federal Government created and granted automatic recognition to two government-sponsored political parties, the Social Democratic Party (SDP) and the National Republican Convention (NRC).

Like most other Nigerians, the Niger Delta women received this turn of events with mixed feelings. While those in the Peoples Solidarity Party (PSP) and the Nigerian National Convention (NNC) who had worked so hard to make their associations come out first and second respectively at the national level, felt somewhat demoralized, exhausted and frustrated, those whose associations had not done too well, such as the Patriotic Front of Nigeria (PFN), the Liberal Convention (LC), the Nigeria Labour Party (NLP) and the Republican Party of Nigeria (RPN), amongst others, received the decision of the government with joy. The reaction of the latter group was informed by their fear of the typical Nigerian practice of "winners take it all and losers lose it all." Indeed, it was the feeling of most Nigerians that the government's decision helped to make every member of the two political parties equal, and therefore, made it impossible for either individuals or groups within them to claim that they founded or financed the parties. For the Niger Delta women, especially those of Rivers and Bayelsa extraction, most of whom were financially weak and dependent, and so, could not have made much impact in the party hierarchy, this was a positive development.

## **VII. The Building of the Social Democratic Party and the National Republican Convention**

It is one thing to decree the 'two grassroots political parties,' the Social Democratic Party, SDP, and the National Republican Convention, NRC, into existence, and quite another thing to nurture and build them up to be in a position to provide viable government. While it is true therefore, that the Babangida administration continued to grant financial, infrastructural and moral support to sustain the two parties, the members of these political institutions themselves played the major role in keeping the parties going until 1993, when at first, they were thrown into a sea of confusion by their creator himself, President Babangida, and later killed prematurely, by his military successor, Major General Sanni Abacha. For our present purpose, however, we would concern ourselves just with the role played by the Rivers and Bayelsa women in the building up of these parties.

As a result of the circumstances surrounding the birth of the SDP and NRC, a great deal of public enlightenment had to be done, not only by the MAMSER Directorate and NEC, but also by the old Rivers State Ministry of Information and Culture to make them acceptable to the masses and potential voters. Incidentally, both the MAMSER Directorate and the Ministry of Information were under female bosses – Miss Gloria Fiofori and Dr. (Mrs) Bene Willie- Abbey, respectively. Realising the opportunity the Rivers and Bayelsa women had lost in the past due to their widespread apathy towards political activities these women were determined to do all they could to ensure the full integration of the womenfolk into the mainstream of the nation's political life.

They therefore went out of their way to give some special attention and messages to the women in every public enlightenment forum, or social and political mobilization effort that was made. The wife of the then President, Mrs. Maryam Babangida, the wives of the various governors (that ruled the old Rivers State within our period of study), Mrs Jane Adeleye, Mrs Ufuoma Ukpo, Mrs Florence Abbe; and later, Mrs. Rose Ada-George, as well as the wives of the various sole administrators and local government chairmen were also very cooperative in this respect. Taking advantage of their positions as the 'First Ladies' in their respective domains and, the chairpersons of the Better-Life for Rural Women Programme, they were able to mobilize enormous human and material resources to boost the efforts of the MAMSER Directorate and the Ministry of Information at fully integrating the Rivers and Bayelsa women into the mainstream of national politics and the economy.

Thus, before and during the execution of any major item on the political transition programme, be it the registration of the two political parties, or the election of party officers and delegates to the congresses and conventions, the citizenry were extensively enlightened. As a consequence of the constant pressures from the Presidency, the women in particular, were sometimes specifically mobilized to play the role expected of them.

It is against this backdrop that we can adequately understand the significant upsurge in women's participation and interest in politics at the different stages of the programme of transition to the Third Republic. While it has not been possible for us to have an accurate census of the number of Rivers and Bayelsa women who joined the defunct political associations, and later, the two approved political parties; those who actually

won or lost, as well as those who received political appointments at the various levels of government and party administration, there is every reason for us to believe from all indications, that many more women became politically conscious and active during the transition period than ever before in the history of Niger Delta. A preliminary result of our investigation shows that, during the period under consideration, many Rivers and Bayelsa women contested for offices amongst themselves; against their male counterparts; and against politicians from other states of the federation. While most of them lost, particularly to their male opponents, some were able to record 'land-slide' victories.

At the ward and local government levels we had names like Felicia Makurai from Yenagoa (now in Bayelsa State), Gloria Tolofari from Bonny (Rivers State), and Felicia Isu from Ogbia (Bayelsa State). They contested as councillorship candidates but failed. At the same time, Mrs. Adeline Opuene and Mrs. Seigha Solomon (alias Gbounkoro-ara) from Nembe-Brass (Bayelsa State), and Miss Anjuba Oruambo from the former Degema Local Government Area of Rivers State defeated their male opponents to secure seats in their respective local government legislatures.

At the State level, while Ms. Ledee Ndordu from Gokana (Rivers State) failed in her bid for a seat in the Rivers State House of Assembly, Miss Daisy West from Asari-Toru (Rivers State), Miss Agatha Waritimi (now Mrs. Goma) from Ekeremor (Bayelsa State) and, Mrs. Evangeline I. G. Hart from Bonny (Rivers State) successfully secured places in the former Rivers State House of Assembly. Mrs. Hart was later elected Deputy Majority Leader of the House. Still at the State level, Chief (Mrs.) Zainab Ibitein Diète-Spiff also came fourth as the first Rivers woman to challenge the menfolk on the coveted state gubernatorial office, though ultimately, she failed to capture the seat.

The Niger Delta women also vied for positions at the national level. Miss Susan Otiotio fought to represent the former Brass Federal Constituency, but lost. However, Dr. (Miss) Boloere Ketebu succeeded in securing the former Yenagoa Federal Constituency seat. Indeed, she was the first Bayelsa woman to have won a seat in the National Assembly, and the only female member of the House of Representatives in the derailed Third Republic. She later became the President of the National Council of Women's Societies, NCWS, Abuja.

Again, for the first time in Nigerian history, a Rivers's woman, Mrs. Pyahe Wifa of the N.R.C from the old Khana Local Government Area, was among the 300 presidential aspirants that began the race to secure the people's mandate for the Presidency. Although she failed to make any significant impact, there was no doubt that she had taken a step for which history will continue to remember her.

At the local, state and national levels, Niger Delta women also held positions of great responsibilities in their respective political parties. For instance, in the old Brass Local Government Area (now in Bayelsa State), Mrs. Kuku, who was elected first as the Treasurer of the N.R.C, later became the acting Chairman of the party for a considerable length of time, following the leadership crisis that made the seat vacant. In later years, she was also to become the "N.R.C., Women Leader" in the old Rivers State, a position she occupied until the party was dissolved by General Abacha in November, 1993.

The transition period also saw the appointment of another Rivers's woman, Miss Ama Pepple, first as the Executive Secretary of the SDP in the former Rivers State and later as the Clerk of the Senate. In both offices, she proved herself to be up to the tasks.

### **VIII. Miscellaneous Contributions**

It is necessary, at this juncture, to add that there were some Bayelsa and Rivers women, who, though did not identify themselves with any of the political groupings, and were not also employees of the transition agencies, yet, demonstrated great patriotism by giving moral and material support to the government transition agencies, particularly the MAMSER Directorate. Such women, though rare, were found in most of the local government areas of the old Rivers State. They made their contributions in different ways, and to different degrees depending on their social and financial standings.

While throughout the two states, some of these women joined the MAMSER/WAI Brigade and the Nigerian Security and Civil Defence Corps to assist the MAMSER Directorate, the Police and the State Security Services in the execution of the transition programme, there were a few who went beyond this. They were those who committed substantial parts of their time and personal resources either as members of the MAMSER Committees or, simply as community and youth leaders, to help the transition agencies to succeed. One such woman was Hon. Dame (Mrs.) Mercy G. Alagoa, JP. Long before the dawn of the Babangida era, she had been known for her role as a prominent woman and community leader. She was also known for her philanthropic disposition, both within and outside the Brass and Nembe Local Government Areas, (now in Bayelsa State). Based on these and other attributes, such as her political neutrality and, the general respect she commanded from all sexes, classes and sections of the Brass and Nembe Local Government Areas, she was appointed the Chairperson of the MAMSER Committee in this area in 1989 by the present writer, who was then the MAMSER officer in charge of the area. Through her association with the MAMSER Directorate, she came to appreciate

the great problem of mobility confronting the MAMSER office in the old Brass Local Government Area. And, as her practical solution to this problem, she donated her speed boat to the MAMSER office. With this, the movement of the MAMSER officers in BALGA in their efforts at arousing political consciousness in the new dispensation was enhanced. This was, indeed, a unique contribution that remained unrivalled throughout the transition period in the old Rivers State and, perhaps, beyond. The State Director of MAMSER, Miss Gloria Fiofori herself, acknowledged this fact in her letter of appreciation to Mrs. Alagoa thus:

*I write to convey to you the gratitude of the Directorate for Social Mobilisation, Rivers State, for the boat trunk you donated to our zonal office in the Brass Local Government Area. This boat will help, in no small measure, in enhancing the movement of our officers in the local government area in their efforts at arousing mass political consciousness on the new political dispensation.*

*In an age when the average Nigerian thinks always of what the government can do for him, it is particularly remarkable and indeed encouraging that an individual extends a hand of assistance to a government agency. Your gesture is especially heart-warming as it gives a ray of hope that there still exist in this country, persons who think of what they can do for their government and not what the government can do for them. The directorate is proud to associate with you. We are convinced that with the support and co-operation of well-meaning and patriotic citizens like you, this directorate will succeed in its national assignment of generating a new and positive social and political consciousness among the people. (Fiofori, 1990:1)*

With this contribution, the irony and contradiction inherent in an immobile MAMSER officer trying to mobilize a demobilized and apathetic people in an extremely inclement riverine environment such as the Brass Local Government Area, was resolved. Mrs. Alagoa later became National Electoral Commissioner in charge of Bauchi State of Nigeria, an appointment that made a man known for his frankness, Eradiri, (1987:1) to comment as follows:

*Today, you are appointed Electoral commissioner by the Federal Government. The gesture is the beginning of a greater tomorrow. The best man for the best office is a woman. In Bayelsa State, you are one singular woman of that type. The managing Director of Mackletoki, Madam Oruwari of Rivers State is another.*

## **IX. Conclusion**

It apparent from the foregoing survey that, never before in the history of the Niger Delta people had there been such conscious and conscientious efforts at raise the level of political consciousness and participation of women as the ones initiated and vigorously pursued between 1985 and 1993, the so-called "Babangida era". During this period, we saw the Niger Delta women demonstrating greater courage and zeal to compete for political offices ranging from local government councillorship to the presidency of Nigeria. And more importantly, some of these women actually won seats in their respective political parties, and at the various levels of government purely on merit, beating their seemingly invincible male political contenders in some cases.

In spite of these encouraging performances, as far as electoral successes are concerned, it remained true that, compared to the performances of the menfolk, the women did not record as much success in closing the wide gap existing between them and their male counterparts. This leads us to the question of why many Rivers and Bayelsa women crashed at the polls.

Some women leaders and political analysts have attempted to answer this question. Mrs Christiana Alu, a one-time Chairman of the N.C.W.S., Abia State, attributed the continued poor outing of women in partisan politics to the domineering attitude of men in politics (Odele, 1993). Chief Ebenezer Babatope also agrees with this view when he said that our men are not prepared to tolerate women who were supposed to be in the kitchen (Okuku, *et al.*, 1991).

Not all observers however agree with this view. Some have blamed the women themselves for their political misfortunes. According to Okuku, *et al.* (1991), their failure can be explained by their failure to mobilize for support which, in the Nigerian context, is a difficult task. A third explanation blames the general poverty that afflicts many would-be female politicians for their misfortune. This point is particularly important, because, at the present stage of Nigeria's political development, economic power is, to a large extent, a *sine qua non* for political power. And lastly, the inexplicable tendency among women to prefer male candidates to females has also been seen as a challenge.

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