

THE CULTURAL EVOLUTION OF NIGER DELTA REGION OF NIGERIA: AN INTERROGATION OF ITS INFLUENCE AND COMPLIANCE

BY

Okafor, Gabriel Ogechi Ph.D

Department of Peace Studies and Conflict Resolution
University of Agriculture and Environmental Sciences, Umuagwo

, Imo State.

gabrielokafor73@yahoo.com

gabriel.okafor@uaes.edu.ng

08038930373

Abstract

Investigating the influence and compliance of the cultural evolution among the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria with a critical attempt to highlight the key roles played by the cultural institutions in the life of the people of this region is the key concern of this research. The work covered the origin of the Niger Delta people as well as the socio-political organization of the area. Through qualitative method of rigorous research ranging from field work, use of libraries, review of books, the role of culture and its compliance was examined. Interesting issues such as the religious beliefs of the Niger Delta people and the art of the people were studied. Similarly, critical study on oil and its significance in the Niger Delta Region were highlighted. However, in spite of the efforts made by the indigenous people of Niger Delta in the areas of arts, industry, etc., their contributions to development were ascribed colonial oriented. The paper, therefore, argues that, the people of Niger Delta are exposed in areas of interpersonal and intergroup relation as a result of their early contact with people outside Nigeria. Therefore, with the level of exposure of the people of Niger Delta, it was generally observed that, Niger Delta people had been active participant in the economic and political development of the area and are even prepared to contribute more to make area a centre of economic and political excellence.

Keywords: *Compliance Culture, Evolution, Niger-Delta,*

Introduction

This paper on the cultural evolution is meant to examine various areas that expose the nature of the people of Niger Delta mainly on the areas of socio-economic and political developments. The Niger Delta Region is a reflection of the multi ethnic composition of the wider Nigerian society. Nigeria is made up of different ethnic groups with different arts, and cultures reflected glaringly in their behavioural patterns, religious believes, modes of dressing, farm implements and farm produce. It is also stated that, "... there are more than 200 distinct ethnic groups in Nigeria, most of whom have distinct customs, traditions, and languages".¹ Thus, Niger Delta area is part of the ethnic groups in Nigeria with their physical, environmental, social, economic and political characteristics.

Consequently, the work will examine the structure of the indigenous religion and points out that, as heterogeneous and divers as the people of Niger Delta are so also is the indigenous religion of the people. However, in spite of different religious background, a centralized structure of rituals and beliefs pervades the whole of Niger Delta indigenous religion. Omoregbe in his words observed that,

... the etymology of the word 'religion' Shows that it is essentially a relationship, a link established between two persons, namely, the human person and the divine Person believed to exist. It is something that links or unites man with a transcendent being, a deity, believed to exist and worshipped by man.²

Therefore, religion has to do with people's beliefs and opinions concerning the existence, nature, and worship of a deity or deities and a fixed relationship between the human self and some non-human entity, the sacred, the supernatural, the self-existent, the absolute or simply, God. To this point, the Niger Delta people of Nigeria were part and parcel of the same group of people that held religion to a prime esteem and formed part of their daily activities.

In the same hand, the arts and socio-political arrangements of Niger Delta Region are of utmost important in the course of this study considering the relevance of political organization in the development of a society. Politics and economics work hand in hand. Political stability leads to economic development and without inclusive of politics there will be no stability.³ Admittedly, the Niger Delta people were rich in arts which strengthens the economy of the area and has overtime shaped the socio-political organization which places an orderly system of socio-economic and political transition of the people. The main purpose of this work is to uncover the socio-economic and political activities of the people of Niger Delta Region of Nigeria and as observed by Anyanwu, the key objective [of any study] is to know the truth or fact of the past.⁴

The Niger Delta People

The Niger Delta Region of Nigeria comprises of communities that are located between the coast of the River Niger and the Atlantic Ocean. In the contemporary time, the Niger Delta States belongs to the South South sub-region with about forty (40) ethnic groups speaking about two hundred and fifty (250) different dialects. This part of the coast referred to as the Niger Delta is the territory which lies between the estuaries of Benin River to the West and the Cross Rivers to the East of River Niger.⁵ This region is criss-crossed by a Web of creeks which link together the main rivers, namely, Forcados, Nun, Benin, Brass, Bonny, all estuaries of the River Niger, the Kwa-Ibo, the cross and other separate streams.⁶

Although, in the past, the core people of the Niger Delta area are from the South East and South South fringe of Nigeria. Before the advent of crude oil in the late 50s, the Niger Delta was an area which was known as the oil Rivers because, it's an important palm producer and centered around the same core Niger Delta Region. This was between 1885 to 1893 and it's called the British Protectorate before changing to Niger Coast protectorate at the beginning of 1893.⁷ Thereafter, with passage of time and political excise in the arrangement of Nigeria before and after independence brought the areas of Niger Delta to Eastern Nigeria.

In the year 2000, the administration of Chief Olusegun Obasanjo brought the Niger Delta States to nine (9) namely, Abia State, Akwa-Ibom State, Bayelsa State, Cross-River State, Delta State, Edo State, Imo State, Ondo State and Rivers States.

Thus, it will be necessary to trace the Origin of Niger Delta people which according to Crowder, part of the Niger Delta PeopleS might have settled in Benin but later left and would not want to return there, possibly because of an upheaval in the early Benin Empire.⁸ He further posited that Ijo people had already inherited the Delta area long before the arrival of the Portuguese but that they were settled in small scattered villages in the tidal zone.

Nonetheless, the heterogeneous nature of Niger Delta people makes it difficult to study the origin of the area unless on a piece meal. It is also stated according to Afigbo that.

It is difficult to reconstruct the early history of a preliterate and acephalous people. Those who seek to do so can easily fall victim to either wild Romanticism or sterile skepticism. These two dangers have been among the main obstacles to the proper study of the history of the ... peoples of South Eastern Nigeria, and until a decade or so ago those who made excursions into this subject were ensnared by the one or the other mistake.⁹

To emphasize on the tradition and Origin of Itsekiri people, their origin as a kingdom has been traced in 1473 Migration of Iginua, the heir apparent to the Bini throne during the reign of Oba Oluwa. Iginua and his party migrated out of Bini on discovering that, he would not be made king and mixed with the Ijo and Urhobo to develop the kingdom of Itsekiri.¹⁰ This is also as it implies to other group of the Niger Delta and to this point, would be better explained through states affinities.

The Ibibios with the Efiks migrated down the Cross River during the first of the 17th century and founded creek town and other settlements including Calabar. On September 23rd, 1987 the South-Western third of Cross River State got created as a new state called Akwa Ibom State. Thus, Akwa Ibom was created by combining the Uyo, Ikot Ekpene, Eket and Abak divisions of old Calabar province. Akwa Ibom State enjoys a relatively homogenous ethnicity with the inhabiting ethnic groups; Ibibo, Annang, Oron, Ibeno, and Eket. The Ibibo are the largest group followed by the Annag. Language similarities exist among the ethnic groups and they readily express similar customs.

Bayelsa State is dominated by the Ijaw ethnic group whose members speak Ijaw language. Other Ijaw dialects include Tamu, Mein, Jobu, Oyariri and Tarakiri. There are other pockets of ethnic groups such as Urhobo and Isoko.

In Delta State, the major ethnic groups are the Urbobo, Igbo, Izon, Isoko and Itsekiri. Many of the people claim a common ancestry and their cultures are similar.

Rivers State was created on May 27th 1967 by a military Decree and the ethnic composition of the State is very diverse. These include Kalabari, Ikwerre, Okirika, Ibani (Bonny and Opobo) Epeye, Ogba, Etche, Khana, Gokana, Eleme, Ndoni, Abua and Odual.¹¹ "The earlier home where the Niger Delta peoples migrated from, to their present homes is still an issue of debate and open to contemporary scholars to engage actively with the employment of other disciplines in the explanation of tax ahead.¹²

The people of the Niger Delta area are known for palm oil produce and the land is filled with crude oil as the largest oil producing area in Nigeria. In Nigeria, they are seen as the minority that led to the constitution of Sir Willink commission of 1958 to look into the yearning of the people of the area and uptil today, the area is the most crisis/conflict region in Nigeria. The reason for the crisis is based on the oil exploration in the area by multinational cooperations that had nothing or little to do with the welfare of the citizens thereby subjecting the masses to untold hardship or poverty.

The Socio-Political Organization Of The Niger Delta People

Socio-Political Organization in Niger Delta area of Nigeria in the pre-colonial epoch was direct rather than representative. It is believed that greater equality of wealth, power and prestige was achieved in pre-colonial societies. This implies that, equality in pre-colonial societies have direct individual access to resources and mobility. All these factors equally limit imposition of control by one individual or another. Pre-colonial Niger Delta societies allowed much more participation of all including women in politics. Onwubiko asserts that, “the social and political organization of the Delta city-States was based on the House system and the system served much useful purpose”.¹³ The house system was therefore the most characteristic feature of the Organization of the Niger Delta area. Thus, the “House” system was a manifestation of decentralized system of socio-political organization that existed in Niger Delta area except for the Itsekiri that practiced centralized system.

The Itsekiri evolved as a compact and more homogeneous in nature unlike the Isoko, the Urhobo and the Ijo that made up village groups and politically segmented communities.¹⁴ Itsekiri had a rulership of Olua and Council of Ojoye that exhibited the hallmarks of a centralized government. Unlike other areas of Niger Delta, Itsekiri developed a homogeneous system administered by Olua and his council of advisers called Ojoye as well as the important roles played by the priest of oracles in issues concerning the kingdom. It is therefore, stated that, the Olu and the Council rather than the Olu-in-Council were responsible for legislative, executive and judicial powers in the area. What the above statement implies is that, the Council does not have absolute “check-Authority” over Olua in Itsekiri Kingdom which earn the later absolute enjoyment of full authority in the kingdom.

The Religious Beliefs Of The Niger Delta People

In Niger Delta area, the idea of God is supreme and people adhered strictly to the tenets and rules expected of them. However, different ethnic groups in Niger Delta address God in their own name. Awolalu and Dopamu stated how, Osanobua the name of the Supreme Being among the Edo means the source of all beings that carries and sustains the world or universe.¹⁵

Consequently, other areas of the Niger Delta also addressed God in their own name such as Ijaw in the pre-Christian era addressed God as “Temearau” that created all things, while the Okrika addressed God as Tamunoba the creator of the world and they are conceived in feminine terms. Tasia and Olumati asserted that,

In spite of the prominence and power attributed to Him, the Supreme Being in Niger Delta indigenous religion is not directly approached and worshiped; rather people put their requests and petitions before the numerous divinities that ... defined areas of jurisdiction. Their powers or areas of competence are directly linked to the exact attributes assigned to them. Although, they are inferior and subordinate to the Supreme Being, they are at the centre of the belief system, receiving sacrifices and petitions from devotees on behalf of the supreme Being.¹⁶

Therefore, the divinities can simply be said to have been brought into existence by the Supreme Being and their duties is to work as His functionaries in the areas of life for which they have special attributes. These divinities operates with shrines that are maintained by priests and priestesses where sacrifices are offered to the divinities who are believed to possess the power to bless, protect and punish on behalf of the Supreme Being.

Chiefly among the divinities in Niger Delta regions includes; Olokun in Edo which means the owner of the sea, Ogiuwu the thunder divinity that brings evil men and women to justice, Amoru in Ijaw is a village divinity that protects the village against evils etc. One very significant element in the Niger Delta indigenous religion is the belief in spirits and it is difficult to distinguish between the structure of spirits and divinities.¹⁷

Therefore, the religious beliefs of the people of Niger Delta in the pre-colonial period as evidenced in our study above was the belief and worship of the Supreme Being through divinities as intermediary to Him. Even in the contemporary times, most people of Niger Delta in spite of massive change to Christian religion still practice the belief in Supreme Being through divinities. Although, with the advent of Christian religion and Western education, most people of Niger Delta have put themselves off with the traditional belief while there were good number of them that practice religious syncretism.

The Arts Of The Niger Delta People

The arts of the people of Niger Delta area were influenced by their geographical location. The people were mainly located at coastal areas and some live in islands thereby making it possible for their arts to develop alongside river-influenced arts and craft. In Bayelsa State, the people were known for Canoe building, fish nets, fish trap making, pottery, basket and mat making. They were also good in timber production that helped in the manufacturing of toilet roll, tooth picks, ice cream sticks and mainly thriving in canoe furniture industry. In Rivers State, production of traditional fired clay and bronze were of immense significance. They also engage in fish trap making, canoe building and pottery as in Bayelsa State. Delta State were good in boat building, textile, manufacturing of fishing nets etc.¹⁸

In Akwa Ibom State, they were known for raffia and cane craft that made Ikot Ekpene known as raffia city. In craft making, they engaged in ritual objects used by female fertility cults which are often beautifully painted with white clay. In the area of pottery, they produce clay pots for cooking, musical drum pots, drinking mugs, etc. Another area of importance is smitten and metal crafts which they engaged for the production of ornamental swords, ceremonial staffs, metal boxes, pan pots, hoes, machetes, chisels, beds etc.

Generally, the Niger Delta people were rich in arts through the following areas; weaving, painting, sculpture, architecture, music and most importantly, Grotesque mask that were sacred symbols reserved for dangerous ancestral spirits masquerades. These were the good art work of the Niger Delta people in their quest to contribute meaningfully to the growth of the entire society and as great fishermen, hunters and gatherers of the products of the riverine environment,¹⁹ made use of smitten and metal works to attain the purpose.

Oil And Its Significance In Niger Delta Region

It is important we state at this juncture that, Niger Delta Region of Nigeria is an area of Milk and Honey, meaning that, the “Black Gold” crude oil is found in large commercial quantity in the area. Historical evidence has shown the strategic importance of the region located around coastal areas that facilitated the growth of international trade on slaves, palm oil, fish, salt, etc., On the one hand, exchange of Western commodities such as glasses, gun, tin food, etc., also guaranteed its visibility at the international scene. Thus, the discovery of oil in the region between 1956-1959 elevated the area to attract the attention of international community towards exchange of oil in international trade.

What it implies is that, the economic history of Niger Delta area centres around international trade with the discovery of oil that made exceptional remark and input in aggravating tension and negligence in the area. The Niger Delta oil crisis in Nigeria has caught the attention of both local and international conflict analysts. While certain analysts and scholars observed that the crisis is precipitated by Nigeria's high dependence on rents from crude oil and the resultant weak governance and looting opportunities from rebels, others argue that, it is as a result of the economic and political marginalization of the Niger Delta people whose oil-rich land is the "goose that lays the golden eggs".²⁰ Consequently, some accused international oil explorers of causing economic hardship in the area as a result of chemicals that could not allow fish to grow in their seas as well as their farmland. Others contented that, leaders of the region failed to remit to their people the welfare packages given to them as well as national and state government lack of interest on realistic outfit that will help to arrest the crisis situation. It is therefore stated that, the unending conflict, tension and crisis in the Niger Delta Region were not as a result of oil exploration but poor management of oil exploration in the region from international oil explorers, community leaders and the government.

Critical Overview Of Cultural Evolution Of Niger Delta Region Of Nigeria: An Interrogation Of Its Influence And Compliance

The Niger Delta Congress (NDC) is a socio-economic and political organization of the ethnic nationalities of the Niger Delta region and has worked gallantly to the progress of the region. In the region, insecurity such as banditry and kidnappings especially in the northwest region, continued insurgency by terrorist groups as well as separatist agitation were handled by the NDC. Despite the problem of poverty, illiteracy, corruption, unemployment, child labour, health problem, etc., the region still maintains an uninterrupted cultural system that helped them to acquire the dividends of some development commission. Being an oil rich region in Nigeria and a coastal city, the area attracted foreigners both internally and externally that boasted the inter-social cooperation among inhabitants of the area. In all, the area is influential in their religious belief, arts, custom and especially in oil production both palm oil and crude oil.

Conclusion

The study of the cultural area of the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria centred around the influential culture of the people of the area. As earlier studied above, it is important to note that, the people of Niger Delta are located along the coastal lines,²¹ and the advantage of their location hugely facilitated the growth of international trade as well as the manufacturing of local implement that aided the growth of industry in the area. The study showed that, the people were prominent in art and it is considered that, "by A.D.500, the people ... had acquired the knowledge of iron-smelting and iron finally played a role in traditional African cultures in its use as native currency: an indication, until almost the present day, of its past value and importance".²² Consequently, the heterogeneous nature of the area made it possible for people to exhibit their individual talents thereby affecting positively the socio-political organization of the area, her religious beliefs and most importantly advanced their reach into spreading the influences of their culture to other areas.

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