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Oil Politics and Violence in Postcolonial Niger Delta Drama

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Abstract

Oil is the dominant motif, defining metaphor, and most importantly, site of contestation and oppositionality in postcolonial Niger Delta literature, particularly in the 21st century. This paper examines how oil politics engenders and fosters neo-colonial

exploitation, internal colonization and disruptive socio-political and economic relations within and among Niger Delta communities. The plays in this study reveal that the Niger Delta is under socio-economic, political and environmental “terrorism” of the Federal Government of Nigeria, multinational oil companies, and reprobate, self-seeking sons and daughters of the Niger Delta. However contributory issues of ethnicity and marginalization may be to the crises rocking the Niger Delta, the crux of the matter, this paper argues, is that by polluting Niger Delta communities (youth groups, chiefs, economic and political elite) with the viruses of greed, corruption and violence, the collective aspirations and goals, patriotic spirit, unity, collective struggle of the peoples of the region have been gravely undermined. The inevitable consequence is that the Niger Delta has become a hotbed of oppression, corruption and violence. This study is important for using the postcolonial theory to analyse the “internal colonization” of the oil-rich Niger Delta region by the corrupt and oppressive Nigerian state, rather than exploring the conventional binary opposition between an innocent/helpless African state and an oppressive colonial or neo-colonial European power. In essence, this paper argues that oil politics has turned the Nigerian state against its own citizens in the Niger Delta region. The region is now like a house divided, and as such contemporary postcolonial Niger Delta drama can be described as drama of individualism characterized by a dog eat dog culture.

Key words: Niger Delta, Nigerian drama, postcolonialism, internal colonization

Introduction

The Niger Delta is the oil-rich region that is the mainstay of the Nigerian economy. A survey of Nigerian drama on the Niger Delta exposes a disturbing paradigm shift between the pre-colonial/colonial and the postcolonial. In pre-colonial plays, such as J.P. Clark-Bekederemo’s *Ozidi* and Elechi Amadi’s *Isiburu* we see cohesive Niger Delta communities where deviant behaviour or moral aberration does not just constitute offence or crime punishable by society, but more importantly is a breach on cosmic harmony of the society. It is a world with a sense of the numinous, and the supernatural has a place in the affairs of men and social morality. Such plays point to the collective cultural consciousness and ontological affirmation immanent in the communities from which they emanate; the collective struggles of the peoples of the Niger Delta against colonial exploitation, abuse and injustices.

But postcolonial drama on the Niger Delta reveals how oil politics has eroded the values of the communities, broken the communal bonds such that things have fallen apart and brothers and sisters are fighting one another while enemies within and without have taken complete control of oil resources and the environment is degraded with impurity. And with the degradation of the environment, the lives of the people are inevitably degraded.

This study shows that Niger Delta drama, like Niger Delta literature in general, dramatizes, in the main, the struggles and protests of the people against exploitation and dispossession. It also demonstrates that in most of the plays of the colonial period, the enemy is the white man; his Nigerian cronies who are in the minority, sometimes members of the community, are considered and treated as enemies of the people. But in postcolonial Niger Delta drama of today the enemy is within and difficult, more dangerous to fight. Corrupt Niger Delta youths, chiefs, economic elite and political leaders are in league with the Federal Government, acting the neo-colonial script of multinational oil companies, in the internal colonization and exploitation of the Niger Delta.

Postcolonial Niger Delta Drama

J.P. Clark's *The Wives Revolt* provides a gendered perspective to how oil politics undermines the unity and development of communities in the Niger Delta. First, it dramatizes the position that oil politics is politics of exclusion. The setting and characters in the play portray the marginality of the peoples and communities of the Niger Delta. Erhuwaren is an agrarian rural community with no modern social amenities or infrastructural facilities. Unfortunately, oil exploration and spillage degrade the environment so much so that fishing and farming are no longer productive.

Consequently, Koko now cooks with iced fish imported from Europe or American, perhaps. Significantly, no member of the community is a staff of an oil company. There is no government presence in the community, and the people understand that the government is not on their side, neither does it care about them:

Okoro: ... Since you women feel so incensed by what you say is an unjust distribution of the proceeds from our oil industry, why don't you turn your anger upon the government?

Koko: What government? Government that is so far away, and has no face?

Okoro: It is there in Benin, and it is there in Lagos. That's where all the money goes, a great part of it on its way to other places, all far from the oil fields. God, go up there and spit your fire at Government and President and see whether you won't be snuffed out as so many sputtering candles (15-16).

Indeed, Okoro alludes to the brutality that the Nigerian Government has visited on Niger Delta communities whose people demand justice or protest against exploitation and degradation of their environment. Clark locates the conflict in the play in the family: the compensation money paid to the oil company turns wives against their

husbands, and men against women thereby making the people vulnerable to the “bug of corruption”. Yet, as Okoro, the town, crier announces:

Okoro: As for the original matter of oil company money that started all this fire, let it be known here and now that it was not such a big sum of money. Certainly, not so big that it was going to change the condition of our lives permanently for better. It has left the poor, poor, and the rich perhaps a little richer as our oil continues to flow to enrich other people across the country (61-62).

This sense of the ethnic other (“other people across the country”; our oil/other people) is a major contribution of the Niger Delta to Nigerian literature. The Nigerian state is implicated in the “we/they” or self/other discourse, and the government, unfortunately, is a principal part of the other. As plays on the Niger Delta studied here demonstrate, the Nigerian state has abandoned the decolonization project its nationalists started in their agitation for independence and rather joined forces with neo-colonial agents to re-colonize its citizens in general, and the Niger Delta in particular. The deep sense of otherness expressed by Niger Delta characters is inscribed and reinforced by the marginalization and neglect the people have suffered from the Federal Government.

If Nigeria aspires to true federalism, it must address issues of citizenship instead of neglecting or mistreating some groups of people on the basis of tribe or ethnicity, for ethnic injustice and discrimination encourage otherness, discontent and strife, and undermine patriotism, national integration and development. Part of the consequences of the promotion of tribalism and ethnic consciousness is that today we have Nigeria but no Nigerians, except in relation to peoples of other nationalities or Nigerians outside Nigeria. Among Nigerians in Nigeria there are only Igbos, Hausas, Yorubas, Ijaws, Ibibios, Gwaris, Tivs, Ogonis, Efiks, etc, but no Nigerians.

As in *The Wives Revolt*, the conflict in Esiaba Irobi’s *Hangmen Also Die* is caused by compensation money. What we see at work in the play, as in all the plays studied here, is the politics to corrupt, destabilize and control: a Nigerian version of the colonial policy of divide and rule. Both oil companies and the Federal Government use the same policy to keep Niger Delta peoples and their communities in perpetual denigrating poverty. They use profiteers within the oil bearing communities, especially chiefs, to cause disharmony, destabilize the community and weaken the people’s collective resolve and capacity to fight for their rights. This strategy has greatly affected the Niger Delta struggle adversely. As Koko tells us in Ola Rotimi’s *Akassa You Mi*, “oppressors wax stronger when supported by scavengers from the very oppressed” (96). Just as parents transfer their DNA to their children, the Nigerian Government which is enmeshed in the miasma of corruption has turned many Niger Delta communities into

microcosms of the pervasive corruption in Nigeria. This point resonates in most contemporary Niger Delta plays. In *Hangmen Also Die*, some irate youths kill their greedy and corrupt chief for misappropriating compensation money paid to their community, a crime for which they are condemned to death by hanging. Irobi exposes this social malaise thus:

YEKINNI: ... You see, sometime ago, the Federal Government gave the citizens of this state, which as you know is a riverine state, the sum of three million naira as compensation money for the oil spillage which has ruined their farms, their homes, and their lives. But the man they killed, one Chief Isokipiri Erekosima, a commissioner for local government, rural development and chieftaincy affairs, connived with his councilors and local government chairman to confiscate the 3 million naira. The councilors took one million and shared it among themselves. The local government chairman shared one million. The commissioner himself, one million. No single citizen, no matter how wretched, got a single kobo. That was when those young men stepped in (*Hangmen* 12-13)

The young men who stepped in are young revolutionary graduates; several years after graduation they are unemployed and as poverty stricken as their families. They describe themselves thus:

R.I.P: (rising) We are no revolutionaries. Neither are we guerrillas. We are not even freedom fighters fighting for any such stupid thing as our nation's independence.

DAYAN: (his eyes shining) We are professional burglars.

R.I.P: (bitterly) Degenerates!

ACID: Small time thieves graduating into armed robbers.

R.I.P: (more bitterly) Desperadoes

DAYAN: We are the stuff villains are made of.

R.I.P: The sewage in the gutter.

CHORUS: We are the wretched of the earth (*Hangmen* 24).

They also declare among other things, "We have been marginalized out of existence" (32). Irobi's characterization here anticipates Umuko's in *The Scent of Crude Oil*. This gang of criminals which is made up of people like Waritimi Tamumo, a.k.a Mortuary, first class degree in statistics; Atiemie Waribo alias Moshe Dayan, master's degree in

political science; Labomic Allagoa alias Ayatollah Khomeini, L.L.B; Tekena Iketubosin alias hydrochloric acid, M.Sc. microbiology; Konji Amakarama alias Tetanus Tetanus, mechanical engineer; Fubara Igonikon alias accidental discharge, master's degree in guidance and counselling; Tarila Igamima alias R.I.P, Ph.D. in criminology is a good example of how bad leadership and ethnic injustice lead to waste of human resources and social degeneracy. This is the Niger Delta experience. The forces working against the people are not only external (i.e. multinational oil companies representing imperial powers), the worst enemies of the people and the region are enemies within — the insensitive government at the centre, state and local governments in the region as well as chiefs and perverse elements who control the local communities. These enemies within are “the get-rich-quick middle class” (Fanon 141) who have formed formidable alliances with multinational companies to destroy the lives and ecological resources of their people. It is the politics of these enemies within that has made Niger Delta communities, seen as a unit, a house divided.

Isaac Attah Ogezi in *Under a Darkling Sky*, Uzo Nwamara in *Dance of the Delta*, Osonye Tess Onwueme in *The She Said It*, Ahmed Yerima in *Hard Ground*, Eni Jologho Umuko in *The Scent of Crude Oil*, Oyeh Otu in *Shanty Town*, and Chika C. Onu in *Dombrye* dramatize how oil politics has turned the Niger Delta into a marginal other and war zone.

The postcolonial struggle in the Niger Delta is not nationalistic. Franz Fanon in his conception of anti-colonial literature had clearly in mind nationalist struggles based on national consciousness and national spirit. Postcolonial African literature has gone past this stage since the late 1960s. The continental concerns or binarity of black and white or what Soyinka calls “racial retrieval” are no longer on the front burner of the thematics of African literature. Fanon foresaw the capacity of colonial forces to infiltrate the ranks of the “natives” and destabilize communities and weaken the anti-colonial/imperialism struggle. He aptly observed that “the battle against colonialism does not run straight away along the lines of nationalism” (119). He therefore identifies as one of the pitfalls of national consciousness the fact that the national bourgeoisie or educated middle class simply want to be part of the colonial racket. “To them, nationalization” of the nation’s industries and trading sectors “quite simply means the transfer into native hands of those unfair advantages which are a legacy of the colonial period” (Fanon 122). Postcolonial Niger Delta drama justifies the validity of Fanon’s assertion.

The Niger Delta has been a major hub of economic activities right from the earliest period of European (pre-colonial) contact, partly due to its enormous natural resources, and partly due to its geographical location. Drama of the colonial period portrays the peoples of the Niger Delta as gainfully involved in economic activities: many

communities, kings or members of communities have warrior-businessmen who are middlemen between the white men (individual merchants or representatives of trading companies) and members of hinterland communities in the chains of palm oil trade, slave trade, and trade in other diverse commodities. As dramatized in historical plays such as Ola Rotimi's *Ovoranwen Nogbaisi* and Minima's *Odumege* these Niger Delta Kings or communities are not just businessmen, they sign formal treaties with British colonial authorities, treaties that guarantee their monopoly of trade and commerce in their domains. By such treaties, no colonial agency or white merchant was allowed to trade directly with members of hinterland communities. Thus, hinterland communities considered to be under the "colonial" control of Niger Delta monarchs were grossly exploited, abused and oppressed. In Minima's *Odum Egege*, King Jaja and his men unilaterally fix prices for other peoples' commodities. If the sellers or their community leaders do not accept such arbitrary and exploitative prices, they are beaten up and their goods seized. If they accept prices imposed on them, the Niger Delta buyers would determine what to give in exchange for the goods, and sometimes they could give a bottle of gin for many kegs of palm oil, for example. This economic exploitation is the source of the conflict in *Odum Egege*. Odum Egege, the eponymous hero, challenges this oppression and exploitation, leads his people to war against King Jaja's army; they are crushed and he is captured and taken to King Jaja who has him tortured and skinned alive to deter other communities from rebelling against his oppressive reign over them.

Such was the power of leaders and peoples of some Niger Delta communities. Though this image is negative, it is however an image that placed the Niger Delta in a position of power, subjectivity, and if I may add, many communities were beneficiaries of the exploits of their kings. The dignity, stature and politico-economic clouts of King Jaja in Minima's *King Jaja or The Tragedy of the Nationalist*, Oba Ovonranwen in Rotimi's *Ovonranwen Nogbaisi*, Chief Bekederemo in Clark's *All for Oil*, etc justify this view.

In Postcolonial Niger Delta plays, such as Irobi's *Hangmen Also Die*, Nwamara's *Dance of the Delta*, Ogezi's *Under a Darkling Sky*, etc demonstrate that Niger Delta kings, chiefs and politico-economic elite are the worst enemies of their people. Most of the chiefs do not fight to wrest power from Federal Government or oil companies that exploit the oil resources of their land and ruin the lives and environment of their people. Their business or stock in trade is to betray their people in their unbridled quest for wealth. They are in league with "other people" against their own people, a situation that makes the struggles of the well-meaning masses of the Niger Delta over resource control and self-determination almost impossible to win. This is the tragedy of the Niger Delta.

This epic decline in the fortunes and glory of the Niger Delta is memorably captured by J.P Clark-Bekederemo in *The Bikoroa Plays*, three plays set in the first half of the

20th century, where “he considers the concept of communal ownership, how what is commonly owned can be commonly destroyed, bringing in its wake communal death and destruction” (blurb). The displacement of community or collective struggle rooted in ethno-cultural, ontological identity by individualism and its concomitant self-centeredness, greed, strife and many other divisive tendencies have made the Niger Delta a hotbed of violence fueled by external aggression from the Nigerian Government and oil companies on one hand, and internal, intra-community crises. Postcolonial Niger Delta drama is characterized by the traitor archetype. Ogezi’s *Under a Darkling Sky* is a re-enactment of how the Nigerian Government of the Abacha junta conspired with Shell to undermine and destroy the non-violent agitations of Ogoni people under the leadership of MOSOP by corrupting some Ogoni chiefs and leaders. Such traitors make the dramatic character, Saro-Wiwa, to lament, “inwardly, in the privacy of my room, I weep for Ogoni for being saddled by bread-and-butter leaders who’ll turn round to stab them in the backs” (28). These chiefs and leaders namely Chief Edward Kobani, Albert Bade, Chief Orage and Samuel Orage, are not alone in this ignoble act of treachery; common people, Bagia Briggs and Giniwa Igbara, perhaps driven by grinding poverty and loss of dignity and patriotism, take bribe to bear false witness against their own people. 3rd Elder reminds us of how Chief Edward Kobani described such traitors before he was bought over by the Government and Shell.

2nd Elder: Was it not the same Chief Edward Kobani who called such traitors vultures?

3rd Elder: Yes, you sure have a good retentive memory. I remember very vividly the time that he said it. (In awful mimicry) I call them vultures all those who prey on the tears and blood of their people, the government paid chiefs who abdicate their sacred duties to sell their people into modern-day slavery as our forefathers did for minor, items such as beads, mirrors alcohol and tobacco (49).

It is important to note that it is the seeds of discord sowed by the Federal Government of Nigeria and multinational oil companies operating in the region in order to scuttle the legitimate non-violent agitations of the people that have snowballed into unending infernos of violence all over the Niger Delta. Their weapons against the collective struggle of Ogoni people are (a) money with which they bribe and corrupt some people who were committed and loyal to the cause of their people into traitors, and (b) terror. According to Onookome Okome, “Shell, the Anglo-Dutch oil company that operated in the Niger Delta, felt secure with government promises to keep the area safe of trouble-makers” (x).

As I said earlier, postcolonial Niger Delta drama is not about cultural nationalism or national retrieval. The dramatists recognize that the Federal Government and the traitors bought with oil money dripping with the blood of their kit and kin are the home rats that show the oil companies and other peoples that their resources are food to be eaten, trampled upon and abandoned. Saro-Wiwa, the character in the play, tells us that the people protest “against the planned genocide of the Ogoni by the Nigerian nation-state. We’re marginalized in this contraption called Nigeria, our resources legally and inhumanly expropriated from a land turned into a wasteland” (16). The play shows that armed struggle in the Niger Delta is a response to the violence and terror unleashed on the people by the Federal Government in places like Etche and Ogoni where soldiers and policemen burnt villages, committed torture, rape and murder in the name of quelling dissidence. What shows that the Niger Delta is not under “colonial” occupation? In the words of Onyemaechi Udumukwu, “the military is gone, and colonialism is gone, yes. But let’s note what we are going through now. We are going through what we could call domestic colonialism” (610).

The violence in Yerima’s *Hard Ground*, Umuko’s *The Scent of Crude Oil*, Onwueme’s *Then She Said It*, Otu’s *Shanty Town*, Onu’s *Dombrye* and Nwamara’s *Dance of the Delta* is a product of the terror the Nigerian state unleashed on a section of its citizens, Niger Deltans. This terror ranges from the psychological torture of exploitation and exclusion, deadly battle with poverty, dearth of basic infrastructure, environmental degradation, to physical violence resulting in homelessness, rape, torture and massacre.

Niccolo Machiavelli asserts that “a necessary war is a just war and where there is hope only in arms, those arms are holy” (81). As evil as this Machiavellian philosophy may be, and as condemnable as violent agitation may be especially when it begins to derail from its noble, patriotic objectives, one cannot but wonder if the Niger Delta struggle is not a necessary war. Achebe, perhaps, provides an appropriate food for thought in his sagely statement:

it may even happen to an unfortunate generation that they are pushed beyond the end of things, and their back is broken and hung over a fire. When this happens, they may sacrifice their own blood. This is what our sages meant when they said that a man who has nowhere else to put his hand for support puts it on his own knee (45).

Onwueme puts women at the centre of the Niger Delta struggle in *Then She Said It*. Despite the play’s unwieldy plot and ineffective characterization, the revolutionary message of the play is a significant contribution to Niger Delta discourses. Its characters effectively capture the main forces in the Niger Delta struggle namely, Chief Ethiope, the archetypal traitor, is a traditional chief closely allied with Kainji, the Government Official who is of another ethnic nationality, and Atlantic, the

white/foreign oil directory: all of them are shamelessly corrupt and rapacious. On the other hand, are the Niger Delta masses, young and old, all unemployed and impoverished. Like its environment, Niger Delta women are violently abused and raped, and Chief Ethiope symbolically begs white men to exploit, abuse and rape his people in exchange for money and used cars. And girls such as Oshun have taken to prostitution in order to survive. Therefore, Onukaogu and Onyerionwu are right in their assertion that *Then She Said It*, "like most literary works based on the Niger Delta, exposes the tragedy of the betrayal of the collective aspirations and destiny of the Niger Delta people by the unscrupulous and greedy indigenous leaders and politicians of the area" (189).

Conclusion

As the foregoing analysis of postcolonial Niger Delta drama demonstrates, the exploitation of the resources and peoples of the Niger Delta is bad, the various forms of violence against Niger Deltans by the combined forces of the Federal Government and oil companies is worse, but the worst tragedy that has befallen the Niger Delta is that oil politics has turned brothers and sisters against one another and created enemies within, who are strong allies of both the Federal Government and multinational oil companies. This is an important message of postcolonial Niger Delta drama. What resonates in the plays studied here is that oil politics is both exclusionary and divisive; it corrupts and breeds traitors among those who ought to fight against external and internal oppressors (neocolonial forces). Some Niger Delta elements have become the home rats which show bush rats where food is stored in the house. This is partly why the Federal Government and some Niger Deltans have joined forces with multinational oil companies (agents of neocolonialism) to exploit and oppress the Niger Delta with impunity. But if the Nigerian Government fails in its duty to protect and develop the region and its people, the people must resist allowing themselves to be used to ruin their people's lives and communities. As the plays dramatize, a house divided against itself cannot stand.

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