

Conservational Stewardship in Nigeria's Niger Delta Region and the Need for Cautious Eco-Aesthetics

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Abstract

The Niger Delta Region of Nigeria is a theatre of the absurd, considering that with its rich human and natural resources it is embroiled in conflicts. These conflicts result from the neglect of its people and the environment. Yet the region is the economic mainstay of Nigeria owing to its vast oil deposits. The exploration activities of the multinational oil corporations that mine oil in the region do so without regard for the environment, which has become devastated by pollution and other infractions. Militant agitations, local refining of crude oil by the natives, oil bunkering and anti-social vices now rampant in the region manifest as reactions against years of neglect. Against this background the advocacy of avowed environmentalists who claim the position of vanguards of the people appear unsuccessful. Rather communal tensions in the region continually grow. An approach to ameliorate the situation of violence arising from the situation in the region proposed here is cautious advocacy that recognises the values of ecoethics and ecoaesthetics engaged by photographers and poets. Pictures taken by

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environmental activist photographers and the verbal portraits by poets complement each other in stressing the dangers of continued disregard for environmental stewardship in all its manifestations.

Key words: *Ecoaesthetica, Ecoethics, Niger Delta region, Environmental infractions, Photography*

Introduction

This paper presents the environment in Nigeria's Niger Delta region with evaluations of artworks that could inspire eco-friendly inclinations unlike the current reckless environmental stewardship in recent times owing to its heavy crude oil credits. Crude oil was first discovered in the region in 1958 at Oloibri, in present day Bayelsa State. The environment is central to the artistic productions of some contemporary photographers and poets. The environmental infractions in the Niger Delta Region have motivated many creative actions in photography, painting and sculptures, as well as installations and performances with poems. There is no refuting the fact that the effects of oil production in the Region and the art works have inspired serious concerns, even on a global scale. The irony, therefore, is that this concern has not translated into an active programme of obligatory environmental stewardship despite the activities of environmental activists in the region along with international campaigners. The open sores are still running, and they have provoked action in quite a host of artists, poets and photographers. This has given rise to a remarkable body of work, which articulates the conservational encounters in the oil-rich region. Undeniably, this paper draws inspiration from the 2010 exhibition by Ecoaesthetic entitled "Ecoaesthetic: The Tragedy of Beauty", a project by "Exit Art" named "Social-Environmental Aesthetics" (SEA). The mission of SEA includes the exhibition of "artworks that address socio-environmental concerns – and to unite artists, scholars, scientists and the public in discussion on these issues" (2010).

It has become obligatory to examine the communal grounds shared by some poets and visual artists, and to position their art in the larger context of edification in eco-aesthetics/eco-ethics and

social responsibility bearing in mind the relationship that presently exists between oil producing publics and the multinational oil corporations. This position anchors on the insights which contemporary thoughts in eco-ethics, eco-aesthetics and sustainable development offer to key into the ethics of SEA. Bearing in mind, therefore, the botches which previous efforts at ameliorating these effects, it has become imperative to argue for a strong synergy between aesthetic/environmental education, social function and sustainable development (Nnamdi, Gomba and Ugiomoh, 2003; and Ugiomoh, 2009). This paper is in two parts hence a brief on the history and culture of the Niger Delta region, concentrating on its economic prominence and the other on the need for eco-aesthetics and its value and a conclusion.

Nigeria's Niger Delta Region: Historical Background

Situated in Nigeria's tropical region is the Niger Delta region. The name thus is synonymous with the geographical value of the area as the many tributaries of the River Niger clustered around it form sinuous networks of rivers and rivulets that empty into the Atlantic Ocean. The area also is one of the most biologically unique terrestrial freshwaters, aquatic ecosystem and habitat in the world. Such uniqueness places it as the third major body of wetlands in the world. Included here also is an enviable biodiversity when likened to other such water bodies in the world.

This area, thus, has been of incalculable importance to global economies in many ways. In the past, it served as points of contacts between the hinterlands of what is today known as Nigeria. The region has continued to be of value up to this day. Initially, it was a trade outpost with records of touch with the Portuguese that date back to the 16th century. The Portuguese traders at this time paid frequent trade visits to the region. During a second phase, the rise of industries in Europe and her quest for raw materials from the Americas brought about the fraudulent and shameful trade in slaves which tarnished the perception of the area. The sea ports of the Niger Delta offered the needed facilities such as slave camps and trade ports. The trade in slaves became eradicated in 1807. The

abolition of slave trade redirected interest in the region to trade in palm oil.

The Berlin Conference on Africa, which occurred in 1884, sliced the continent into several areas, the British government took control of it. The British then created the Oil Rivers Protectorate 1907, which latter was re-designated the Niger Coastal Protectorate. Palm produce like palm oil, among other by-products, became a significant export from the region through these ports that once traded in slaves, especially the ports of Bonny and Forcados rivers. The effects of these cultural contacts in the area attest to the hybrid fashion associated with the area. The Niger Delta region soon metamorphosed into a crude oil producer. This was when the first productive crude oil well in the town of Olobiri in 1956 came on stream. Crude oil today drives the global economy. For this reason, the territory remains strategic to the economic wellbeing of Nigeria.

The area, like all oil-rich areas of the world, has an enormous economic influence on the world in many ways. However, instead of this status metamorphosing into an advantage, it turned the region into an arena of manoeuvrings because of tensions and fights brought about by shady underhand business deals engaged in by the oil prospecting companies. The exploration activity around crude oil is hazardous as periodic reports from the industry show. As a consequence, the activities of oil exploration has led to the devastation of the natural habitats and its ecologically productive areas. The environmental dilapidation and cultural deprivation, in turn, has bequeathed severe impoverishment of the populace. The high incidence of militant groups in the region is traceable to psychological disorientation within the populace. The known agitators in the area include Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP) and Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND).

The insensitivity of government and its agencies, considering the rape so far recorded in the Niger Delta region remain loud. The business of governance is to encourage the development of a positive culture that robs-off on the wellbeing of the people. What the region has experienced so far is far from such reality. The present administration has so far exhibited some lack of serious engagement

with the people to address the prevalent complaints and the particular state of abject poverty and environmental degradation and neglect. The amnesty programme it embarked upon in the last six years is just under threat of winding down. An evaluation of its impact is yet to be undertaken to evaluate its effect on the people. However, what government ought to engage in is a comprehensive package that accommodates environmental rehabilitation and manpower development of the region. The problems of agitation in the area, as history shows occurred with a military-type uprising in the Niger Delta recorded from February 23 to March 6, 1966. It was inspired precisely by the absence of integrity in the oil search establishment. The Niger Delta Revolution (NDR), as the inventiveness was named, led by Isaac Jasper Adaka Boro and the Niger Delta Volunteer Force (NDVF). Isaac Jasper Adaka Boro led it in Kaiama, in present-day Bayelsa State in Nigeria (Tabekaemi, 1982). Kenule Saro-Wiwa in 1993 engaged a different tactic when he took the case of environmental infraction in his native Ogoni land to the World Environmental Summit, which occurred in Rio in Brazil in 1993. By this act, he brought his native home to the world scene and at the same time confronting the government of Nigeria that had all the while been paying lip service to ameliorating the pains the people of the Niger Delta area had been going through. The military junta of General Sani Abacha murdered him by hanging on November 10, 1995, on trumped up charges of murder. However, the murder of Saro-Wiwa added to the oppression strategy of dictatorial governments. It was designed to suppress protests which had become rife in the area. The situation today, looking at the development profile in the area, has not reduced incidences of protest and militancy. This is why the option of cautious environmental eco-ethics and eco-aesthetics is an option to follow.

Eco-Ethics and Eco-Aesthetics as Viable Option to Follow in the Niger Delta Region

A study and analyses of the work of poets and documentary photographers that highlight the problems defined above regarding the deplorable ecological and human states in the Niger Delta area. From the standpoint of aesthetics and its value, it provides necessary

metaphors that entrench the deals of eco-ethics and eco-aesthetics. Metaphors are valuable in the drive towards eco-aesthetics. Susan Sontag, in *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003) has commented on the nature of artistic works that inspire pity. The metaphors generated by artists in the absence of environmental ethics in the region belong to this category. She is of the opinion that metaphors can check initiative to engage constructive and helpful action that leads to recompense or compensation and needed remediation. It is for this reason that a path to eco-ethics is the focus of this section. Metaphors as images or pictures merit some elucidation in the form of reading and interpretation to open their content to the non-artist and sympathetic public. Such material adequately explicated becomes facts or information. In contemporary aesthetics works that foster knowledge remain the ideal and, therefore, are beautiful. Sontag (1977), in another instance, ascribes ultimate beauty to a photograph. Her reason, which derives from a nomenclature of the photograph, *calotype*, implicates beauty as an agreeable essence. Beyond the captured image are poems which are coeval to the photographs discussed here.

The following rationalisation preserved in SEA brings this dispassionately home.

The Tragedy of Beauty focuses on photography where the tragedy of the image becomes the aesthetic of the environment. The artists in this exhibition do not have a passive engagement with the environment; rather, they seek out beautiful and tragic images to emphasise the human impact on fragile ecosystems, to elucidate our relationship to nature, and to visualise the violence of natural disasters. The purpose of The Tragedy of Beauty is to demonstrate that global environmental struggles are creating an aesthetic issue.

The SEA has only reemphasized the tragic as considered suitable by the photographer as worthy of practical knowledge. What we learn from images become comprehensive sources of information. Awareness and understanding refine the individual as they

transform. This is why the tragedy of “the image becomes the aesthetic of the environment,” instructing us on how to stay in harmony with the surroundings that are equally part of us. George Osodi, Timipre Willis Amah and Ken Saro-Wiwa have variously engaged metaphors focused on environmental infractions in the Niger Delta region. Saro-Wiwa, a poet and novelist, lost his life in the campaign for an obligatory natural temperament that ought to have been championed by the government of Nigeria. Before then he was a known environmental activist. George Osodi on the other hand, came to the glare of publicity as a documentary photographer, through his concern and passion for documenting topical social and environmental issues. George Osodi's photographs focused on the neglected and abandoned environment and people of the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. Moreover, recently he undertook an update of the situation in the area. His earlier endeavour where about two hundred photographs first shown at the *Documenta 12*, 2007 in Kassel, Germany, has also been shown at Del Fin del Mundo, Argentina, and Forum Stadtpark, Graz, Austria in 2009. Osodi's work oddly enough exemplifies human neglect and environmentally horrible tragedies. Timipre Willis-Amah is a professional photographer whose interests in the genre are diverse. His documentation of the Niger Delta environmental infractions has also been shown internationally at Forum Stadtpark, Graz, Austria in 2009 and Munich at the *Last Rites, Niger Delta*, 2012.

These international disclosures follow on social and political synchronisation in the region. This is in the way they call attention to the environmental irresponsibility and contempt for human capital development by the international oil majors in the area; while the Nigerian government appears unconcerned. Moreover, this apathetic attitude of the government has not changed. This revelation only recently confirmed in *The Nation* (May 22, 2015) newspaper's editorial while reviewing the presidency of Mr Goodluck Ebele Jonathan thus;

In the Niger Delta, the environment crawls with the devastation of the oil firms whose enormous profits mock a people whose bowel of the earth has become an

oblation for an imperialist coterie of companies in alliance with our government. The result is that our farmers cannot farm, the hunter's guns are now shy for lack of game, the fisherman can neither swim nor catch fish in its former rivers that teemed with life (19).

Ken Saro-Wiwa's untitled poem below addresses Shell in ravaged Ogoni land in what is akin to the editorial above:

The flares of Shell are flames of hell
We bake beneath their light
Nought for us save the blight
Of cursed neglect and cursed Shell (1995)

Gas Flare is a theme common with documentary photographers in the Niger Delta region. Osodi's work is replete with such themes. In a presentation focused on this subject, a boy caught contrasted an inferno in a flare gas site. The figure has become silhouetted as a result of the colossal illumination of such flares; such flares amount to enormous energy that properly harnessed could supplement the constant absence of electricity often experienced in Nigeria. The advantage host communities have taken of such energies has been to dry their tapioca. This sad development, bearing in mind the constant short supply of this commodity in Nigeria requires amelioration. As Saro-Wiwa in one of his poems truculently proclaims: "The flares of Shell are flames of hell/We bake beneath their light." The implications of gas flaring even their health impact from banished nights in the localities where they obstruct the night remain unimaginable.

Timipre Willis-Amah acknowledges the procedures of illegal oil refining. His records call for caution against engaging in the illegal refining of crude oil. Figure 2 is a pool of crude oil in an artisanal refining site. In the picture is a dug-out interstellar laminated with cellophane and adapted for storage. Such storage environment by all standards is an environment risk. Hence, a storage facility of this nature compounds incidents of environmental hazard. In figure 3, a man skimpily dressed in polyvinyl pants and boots only is captured

against a tank located above ground and with a fire burning under as cooking energy. In this photograph a refining process in on-going to extract petrol, diesel and kerosene. Indeed, the condensation technology has always been available to the people who deployed the technology to refine gin or ethanol from fermented raffia palm wine. The nature of danger here is unwarranted exposure to resultant petrochemical fumes on the environment and the people. The polyvinyl dress is usually put on as cover to avoid incidents of fire. Previously, woven cotton or synthetic fabrics were usually worn to cover the body and they turned out to be deadly. Such textile materials often led to the death of artisanal refiners as the refining fumes trapped in them quickly attracted fire. A habit of dire consequence in such sites is the reckless disposal of sludge in the environment after extracting the refined products from crude oil.

Conclusion

As Sontag observed pictures on their own are dumb truths. The obligation of the historian and or critic is to invest them with words to open up to the nature of events they address before a commendable audience. Each commentator is known to approach meaning from a perspective. In this essay, therefore, the object is succinct. The prevalence of environmental infractions in the area deserves control. What is required then is a halt in environmental hazards the inhabitants of the Niger Delta region of Nigeria experience due to the insensitivity of multi-national oil prospecting companies. The aftermath of such environmental recklessness inspires rebellious actions by indigenes who take laws into their own hands to earn some living off crude oil. That the illegalities, which the above scenarios amount to, can be blamed on the government. This is because the government has not gone beyond lip service in its commitment to the welfare of the people. Beyond the health of the population is the government responsibility with alternative to the laws of the land to guarantee comprehensive notion of eco-aesthetic and eco-ethics.

Thus, the resources for this paper, which are products of two documentary photographers and a poet, aim to reinforce eco-aesthetics. The photograph is a stilled image that codes information.

In the images captured with the technology in the Niger Delta region, information on the wild nature of crude oil commerce remains embarrassing. Pictures, thus assist in visualising the vulnerabilities that burden the environment. The realisation of hurt prompts appropriate actions that rake up aesthetic and ethical questions aimed at amelioration. Courteous environmental aesthetics and eco-ethics are consequences of an informed conscience. The inhabitants of Nigeria's Niger Delta region deserve a healthy and sustainable environment devoid of environmental infractions and absence of environmental stewardship. Hence, photographs accompanied by texts like the poem are perfect means to aesthetic education and where knowledge is power.

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