

Nigeria's Niger Delta and the Challenges of Environmental Stewardship: The Need for Cautious Eco-aesthetics.

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Abstract

The Niger Delta region has been embroiled in acts that are under gird by environmental infraction of great magnitude. These acts point to the absence of environmental stewardship and a concern for eco-ethics. Multi-national oil companies are responsible for these acts. The absence of care from these oil companies for the environment and the people has its own twist. In this regard the indigenes have fallen on erstwhile technologies of brewing local gin for refining oil in conditions that further compromise of the environment. In this paper, documentary photographs by artists on these conditions are relied upon to foster eco-aesthetics. A focus on eco-aesthetics as this paper is defined is an approach to rely on art and its literacy to ameliorate the consequences of abject environmental stewardship.

Key words Aesthetic education, Artists, Environment, Eco- aesthetics, Eco-ethics, Ken Saro-Wiwa, Niger Delta, Nigeria, Poets

Introduction

This paper confronts the environment in Nigeria's Niger Delta region with evaluations of artworks that are focused on the environmental recklessness it has witnessed in recent times owing to its rich crude oil deposits. Crude oil was first exported from the region in 1958 from the town of Oloibri, in present day Bayelsa State. The environment is central in the artistic productions of some contemporary photographers and poets. The environmental infractions in the Niger Delta region have motivated many artistic engagements in photography, painting and sculptures and installations and performances including poems. There is no gainsaying that the effects of oil exploration in the region and the works of art that these have inspired now attract serious concerns, even on a global scale. The irony, therefore, is that this concern has not translated to a positive programme of requisite environmental stewardship in spite of the activities of environmental activists in the region along with international campaigners. The open sores are still running, and they have provoked quite a host of artistes, poets and photographers inclusive, to work. This has given rise to an impressive corpus, which enunciates the environmental challenges in the oil-rich region. Indeed 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)

As a result, it has become necessary to examine the common thread that is shared by a number of the poets and visual artists, and to situate their art within the larger context of education in eco-aesthetics/eco-ethics and social responsibility considering the relationship that currently exist between oil producing communities and the multinational oil corporations. This position is anchored on the insights which contemporary thoughts in eco-ethics, eco-aesthetics and sustainable development offer in effort to key into the ideals of SEA. Considering therefore the failures which previous efforts at ameliorating these effects, especially by acclaimed environmentalists and counterfeit programmes by government and multinational oil corporations, it has become imperative to argue for the need for a strong synergy between aesthetic/environmental education, social function and sustainable development (Nnamdi, et.al, 2003 and Ugiomoh, 2009). This paper comes in two parts hence; a capsule brief on the history and culture of the Niger Delta region focusing on its economic importance and the other the need for eco-aesthetics and its value. These shall be followed by a conclusion.

A Brief on Nigeria's Niger Delta Region

The Niger Delta is located in Nigeria's tropical region where the River Niger empties into the Atlantic Ocean. In the Niger Delta region is encountered one of the most biologically distinctive terrestrial freshwater, marine ecosystem and actuality of habitats that ranks as the third largest body of wetlands in the world. Included here also is an enviable biodiversity when likened to other such water bodies in the world. This complex biomass has been of great 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 remained valuable up till this day as a trading outpost. Records of contact with the Portuguese date back to the 16th century when Portuguese traders paid frequent trade visits to the region. The rise of industries in Europe and her quest for raw materials from the Americas brought about the dishonorable and shameful trading in slaves the region became tarnished for. The ports of the Niger Delta offered the needed facilities such as slave camps and ports. The trading in slaves, which

was abolished in 1807, eventually opened up the trade in palm oil in the region.

Between 1884 and 1885 in the Berlin Conference, Africa was carved into various areas of European influence. This ceded the Niger Delta to the British and, in 1907 the British created the Oil River Protectorate, which latter was re-designated the Niger Coast Protectorate.

Palm oil became a major produce exported from the region through these ports, especially Bonny and Forcados. The effects of these cultural contacts on the region can be attested to in the hybrid fashion associated with the region. Some dress-sense in the region that bear testimony to the cultural trading that took place then are the emergence of the Kalabari Etibo and the large caped dress of the Benin and Urhobo chiefs.

While palm oil was still of high economic value in Nigeria, the Niger Delta region, once the Oil Rivers Protectorate, offered Nigeria an alternative economic resource when the region premiered the first productive crude oil well in the town of Olobiri in 1956. Crude oil today drives the world economy. For this reason the Niger Delta region has remained strategic to the economy of Nigeria. The region, like all oil-rich areas of the world, has great economic influence on the world in many ways. But instead of this status metamorphosing into an advantage it has since turned the region into an arena of intrigues arising from tensions and skirmishes brought about by the absence of clearness in the activities by the multinational oil majors (Alagoa 2004, 63-90). The exploration activity has also led to the destruction of marine habitats and its ecologically productive areas (Stelzig, et.al, ND). The environmental dilapidation and cultural deprivation which now has as its consequence severe impoverishment of the populace has in turn, been responsible for the local band of armed and unarmed agitators like; Movement for the survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP), Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND).

Fig 1



Title: Mend

Artist: George Oshodi

Size: 80cmx120cm

Date:2006

With these developments the sensitivity of government and its agencies whose responsibility it is to foster, sustain and encourage the birth of positive culture in the region appears morbid except for the half-hearted amnesty programme. The ecological disasters which the exploration of crude oil actuates along with the devaluation of the human capital in the region in recent times had hardly manifested when the first military-type uprising in the Niger Delta was experienced from February 23 to March 6 1966. It was inspired precisely by lack of justice within the oil exploration bureaucracy. The Niger Delta Revolution (NDR), as the initiative was named, was led by Isaac Jasper Adaka Boro and the Niger Delta Volunteer Force (NDVF), a local militia he assembled (Tabekaemi, 1982). From the same region Kenule Saro-Wiwa took same revolutionary instinct against perceived shortcoming by the Federal Government of Nigeria in the form of advocacy to the international scene at the World Environmental Summit at Brazil in 1993. He was eventually murdered on November 10 1995, in cold blood by hanging by the General Sani Abacha regime 1993 - 1998. It remains an irony that against a background of natural endowment and the wealth it offers, along with the position of relevance in the power play in Nigeria

the people of the Niger Delta now live in complete denial of influence and without any voice in the determination of their well-being. This condition in part is traceable to the adoption of the strategies of oppression one of which led to the death of Saro-Wiwa.

The inability of various governments in the past to actualize the ideal of good governance remains a source of concern. This is so considering the many environmental infractions in the Niger Delta region and lack of human development.

A Path to Eco-Ethics and Eco-Aesthetics

A study and analyses of the work of poets and documentary photographers that highlight the problems defined above regarding the abject condition in the Niger delta region will provide necessary metaphors aimed at foregrounding the ideals of eco-ethics and eco-aesthetics. Metaphors are valuable in the drive to rely on eco-aesthetics to drive the need for eco-remediation. 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 on the absence of environmental ethics in the region belong to this category. She is of the opinion that this category of metaphors dampens the initiative to engage positive action that leads to restitution or needed eco-remediation where it is considered necessary. It is for this reason that a path to eco-ethics is the focus of this section. It is true that some documented contexts from the Niger Delta region necessarily inspire pity. As metaphors, such pictures deserve some elucidation in form of reading and interpretation to open their content for the non-artist and sympathetic public. Such content properly explicated becomes knowledge. In contemporary aesthetics works that foster knowledge remain the ideal and therefore are beautiful (cf. Gadamer, 1986). The aim here then is to open up the content of what may have been regarded as mere pictures. Sontag (1977), in another instance ascribes ultimate beauty to a photograph for as she notes every scene or action captured by a photographer’s camera was first considered beautiful by the photographer before it was captured. Thus, with some bit of aesthetic education as the photographs to be discussed here stand that it is possible to curtail the reckless environmental condition in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. The following rationalization enshrined in SEA brings this objective 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 emphasize the human impact on fragile ecosystems, to elucidate our relationship to nature, and to visualize 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 re-emphasised the tragic as considered appropriate by the photographer as worthy of knowledge to be consumed. What we learn from images become deep sources of knowledge. Knowledge refines as it reforms; this is why the tragedy of “the image becomes the aesthetic of the environment,” instructing us on how not to treat the environment. George Osodi, Timipre Willis Amah and Ken Saro-Wiwa have variously engaged metaphor focused on environmental infractions in the Niger Delta region. Saro-Wiwa, a poet and novelist, lost his life in the crusade for requisite environmental disposition 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 limelight as a documentary photographer, through his concern and passion to document topical social and environmental issues. George Osodi’s photographs focus on the neglected and abandoned environment and people of the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. And recently he undertook an update of the situation in the region. His earlier endeavor, where about two hundred photographs were first shown at the *Documenta 12*, 2007 in Kassel, Germany, have also been shown at Del Fin del Mundo, Argentina, and Forum Stadtpark, Graz, Austria in 2009. Osodi’s work oddly enough illustrates human neglect and traumatic environmental disasters. Timipre Willis-Amah is a professional photographer whose interests in the genre are diverse. His documentation of the Niger Delta environmental infractions have also been shown internationally at Forum Stadtpark, Graz, Austria in 2009 and in Munich at the *Last Rites Niger Delta*, 2012.

These international disclosures are accompanied by their bearings on social and political synchronization in the region. This is in the way they call attention to the environmental recklessness and disregard for human capital development by the multinational oil majors in the region; while the Nigerian government appears unconcerned. And this unconcerned attitude of 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 mammoth 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 coursed 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 theme a boy caught contrasted an inferno in a gas flare site (fig. 2). The figure has become silhouetted as a result of the colossal illumination of such flares. This definitely amounts to enormous energy that is wasted. The advantage host communities have taken of such energies has been to dry their tapioca. This is a sad development considering that in very recent times this gas is in short supply for the purpose of fueling the energy needs of the nation. As Saro-Wiwa in the poem above points out, "The flares of Shell are flames of hell/We bake beneath their light" The implications of gas flaring even their health implication from banished nights in the localities where they obstruct the night remain unimaginable.

Fig 2.



Title: Niger Boy

Artist: George Oshodi

Size: 80cmx120cm

Date:2006

In recent times Osodi has also recorded the sites of illicit refining that has now become rampant in the region. His recent documentaries also show how some landscape improvements with modern architecture. An architectural piece of this nature evidently is funded with monitory gains from illicit refining. In the same token Timipre Willis-Amah has documented the processes of illicit refining. His documentation which is detailed is a call for caution against engaging in illicit refining of crude oil. (Fig 3) is a reservoir of crude oil in a creek refining environment. The scene in this photograph is a dug-out space that is lined with cellophane material. Such storage environment by all standards is an environment risk. Hence a storage facility of this nature compounds incidents of environmental hazard.

Fig 3



Title: Illicit Refinery Artist: Timipre Willis-Amah Size: 80cmx120cm Date:2012

In fig. 4 a man skimpily dressed in polyvinyl pants and boots only is captured against a tank located above ground and with fire burning under. In this photograph a refining process is on-going. A distillation process in the production of petrol, diesel and kerosene is akin to the ethanol distillation from fermented raffia palm wine. In other words the distillation technology has always been available to the people. The nature of hazard here is excessive exposure of resulting fumes on the environment and the people. It should be noted that the polyvinyl dress is usually worn to avoid incidents of fire, which in the past occurred in such sites when woven cotton or synthetic fabrics are worn. An occurrence of dire consequence in such sites is the disposal of sludge from burnt crude after extracting the refined products within the environment.

Fig 4



Title: Illicit Refinery Process Artist: Timipre Willis-Amah Size: 80cmx120cm Date:2012

In Willis-Amah's figure 5, it is possible to visually estimate the intensity with which the refining fire burns. The sludge is source of this energy, which is also stored in dugout pits. This act, in as much as it is tantamount to environmental pollution, is also a huge act in economic waste. This is because the hydrocarbon contents are of great economic value.

Fig 5



Title: Refining Fire Artist: Timipre Willis-Amah Size: 80cmx120cm Date:2012

Conclusion

As Sontag observed pictures on their own are dumb truths. The responsibility of the historian and or critic is to invest them with words in order to place them before a deserving audience. Each commentator is known to approach meaning from a perspective. Diverse personal perspectives enrich meaning. In this essay the objective is to call attention to the nature of environmental hazards the inhabitants of the Niger Delta region of Nigeria have been subjected to by multi-national oil prospecting and its aftermath on the one hand, and the rebellious actions of indigenes who take laws into their hands in effort to earn some living from crude oil, which their land is blessed with. That the illegalities, which the above scenarios amount to, can be blamed on government. This is because the government has not gone beyond lip service in its commitment to the welfare of the people. Beyond the welfare of the people is the government responsibility with recourse to the laws of the land to guarantee comprehensive notion of eco-aesthetics, which should be accompanied by eco-ethics. Thus the resources for this paper, which are products of two documentary photographers and a poet, aim to reinforce eco-aesthetics. As “tragic images” they have become stilled images informing on the way we have defiled nature, which the human is part. In other words the photographs help us to visualize the dangers we subject nature to and in the process rake up aesthetic and ethical questions aimed at amelioration. 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 are consummate means to aesthetic education and where knowledge is power.

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Biography

Dr. Onyema Emeni is a renowned Painter, Art Historian and Art Critic. He is also a Senior Lecturer in Fine and Applied Arts Department Delta State University, Abraka Nigeria. He is a Fellow of Society of Nigerian Artists. Emeni hails from Obiaruku Delta State Nigeria, Born in December 1951. He attended Government College Ughelli, Auchi Polytechnic Auchi, University of Benin, Benin City and Delta State University Abraka, Nigeria. He obtained O.N.D; H.N.D in Fine Art in 1976 and 1979. Postgraduate Diploma in Technical Education 1999, M.F.A in Painting 2002 and MA/Ph.D in 2005 — married with children.

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