

TRADITIONAL ENVIRONMENTAL EXPERIENCES OF THE NIGER DELTA PEOPLE: TOWARDS A SUSTAINABLE ENVIRONMENTAL ORIENTATION IN NIGER DELTA

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Abstract

The environmental degradation experienced in the Niger-Delta is a catastrophic situation distorting the socio-cultural wellbeing of the people. The peaceful and fertile region of Niger-Delta has experienced prevalent environmental degradation over the years resulting from the inordinate exploration of natural resources and a sheer negligence of the environmental impacts of such activities. The Niger-Delta region used to be one of the best deltas in the world, with a clear harmony between the people and the environment, but with advance of civilization, oil exploration and excessive technological impacts, the region has lost its grace. This study employs the method of hermeneutics to interpret the traditional environmental experiences of the people of Niger-Delta in relation to the prevalent environmental crises in the region. It examines the traditional ecological thought of the region and argues for a transition to an eco-friendly environmental orientation to ameliorate the negative consequences of the environmental degradation. The study recommends the adoption an environmental ethics that resonates with the ecological thought of the indigenous people of Niger-Delta to attain a sustainable environmental orientation in the region.

Keywords: Environmental Degradation, Ecological Thought, Environmental Orientation, Ecocentrism

1. Introduction

Environmental degradation in the Niger Delta is an environmental phenomenon that is raising both national and international agitations given the deplorable state of human deprivation and environmental disaster in the region. The rate of the environmental crisis is quite alarming, and the intensity of damage done in the region cannot be over-emphasized. Niger Delta region is defined as comprising the area covered by the natural delta of the Niger River and the areas to the east and west, which also produce oil (UNDP 2006). There are four ecological zones in the area; the coastal sandy zone, the mangrove swamp zone, the freshwater swamp zone, and the lowland rainforest zone. The region is regarded as one of the most blessed deltas of the world, because of its rich natural and ecological zones. Ojakorotu describes the region as “one of the world’s richest mineral resources region with different species of plants and animals as well as humans (2011, 31). This also provides the reason for the predominant occupations of the people, which are farming, fishing, and hunting.

The region of Niger-Delta regarded as one of the most blessed deltas of the world, is now a victim of environmental abuse. The lives of the Niger-Delta are

dependent basically on land and water; they are farmers and fishers by occupation and these serve as their source of livelihood. These people are deprived of their major source of livelihood, of access to pure water, good farming system, good atmosphere etc because of the prevalent environmental degradation experienced in the region. Bazerman and Hoffman are right when they averred that "...environmental problems are not primarily technological or economic, but behavioral and cultural (1999, 24).

The traditional environmental experience of the people of Niger-Delta is an indication of the obvious bastardization of the environment resulting from human activities. In line with the ecological thought of the people of Niger-Delta, environment is essential to the sustenance of their existence. There is an inherent value attached to the environment such that environment is sacred and must be cared for. In contrast, the activities of human beings have drastically degraded the environment and distorted the ecological thought of the Niger-Delta people.

2. The Environmental Experience in the Niger Delta Region

The people of the Niger Delta are often regarded as peace loving people with a stable social relations and solidarity. In admiration of the nature of Niger-Delta cultural setting, Aghalino observes that "communities in the region organize communal festivals whose program featured religious ceremonies, purification rites, the launch of new dance steps, masquerades and other artistic activities (2011, 5). Conversely, the exploration of oil and the resultant oil pollution in the region has demystified the socio-cultural setting of the indigenous community, Aghalino admitting the dysfunction of the cultural system in the region necessitated by environmental degradation, writes, "the link between unsustainable petroleum exploitation in the Niger Delta and the destruction of the indigenous homeland and culture of the people is undeniable. Traditional lands have been sacrificed on the altar of irresponsible policies (2011, 5). Additionally, Jike lamenting on the negative impact of oil spillage in the region put it rightly, "oil spillage has led to the loss of homelands, and some ancestral homelands have been desecrated and converted, thus truncating the link between the living and the pantheon of forbears (2004, 690).

Land is very central and crucial to the people of Niger Delta and Nigeria as a whole. Most of their religious and cultural activities are carried out on lands, and even their survival and livelihood is dependent on land. The incursion of oil industry in the region has been a curse rather than blessing to this people. Amnesty international should be commended for painting the picture of the situation of Niger Delta vividly:

The people living in the Niger Delta have to drink, cook with, and wash in polluted water, they eat fish contaminated with oil and other toxins, the health of the environment and lives of the people

are intertwined with the health of the water system. The food, water and cultural identity of many local people are closely related to the delta ecosystem. More importantly perhaps is the fact that tens of thousands of families in the Niger Delta rely on fishing on inland rivers as well as offshore for both income and food. The activities of the oil companies have engendered land hunger and subsequently distorted the cultural practices of the people that are tied to their land (Jike 2004, 690).

The experience of deprivation and bastardization of the cultural practices of the people of the Niger Delta alienates them from their cultural identity. This deprivation poses great threats to the continuous harmony of the people. Jike in address of the pathetic experience of Niger Delta environs passionately reveals that:

[T]he little school child is truant because the parents having been displaced from their farms, are unable to meet their obligations to provide food and the recommended textbooks for the child at school. The fisherman sits very early in the day guzzling locally brewed gin (Ogogoro) in his sitting room because the fish in his domain have been depleted...by spillage and industrial effluents that have begun to introduce toxicity and distort aquatic balance, thereby forcing whole species to migrate or die (2004, 692).

Given the displacement of the parents from their source of livelihood, the children grow up lacking formal education because the parents can no longer support their formal education. The lives of these children are already retarded; in an age of information and technology, it is obvious that once one is not informed, one is deformed, and when deformed cannot transform. This also accounts for high rate of illiteracy in the region.

In the cultural setting of the people of the Niger Delta, the use of traditional medicine in curing some illness is rampant, and has proven effective in addressing health issues. Most of these medicinal herbs, plants are found in sacred groves, shrines and forests (Aghalino 2011, 9) Regrettably, oil exploration and exploitation in the region has destroyed some of medicinal trees, herbs and plants, Lergborsi in affirmation of the extinction of these medicinal herbs pointed out, "...there is destruction and possible extinction of medicinal plants and herbs that are rooted in traditional medicine and spirituality of the people as a result of the incursion of the oil industry (2007).

Another area that is adversely affected by oil spillage phenomenon is the family system. The family system in the Niger Delta is cracked such that the parents no longer take adequate care of their children. Jike lamenting on this devastating phenomenon asserted, "Parents have wittingly or unwittingly abandoned their children (2004, 696). Since the parents are displaced, most of them due to lack of technical know-how and skills wallow in abject poverty and cannot feed their

family. The courageous ones who sought for livelihood outside the region are too busy with chasing economic gains without bringing out time for their children. Thus, the children having no one to direct them, coupled with their lack of formal educational training are left to the hands of peer pressure and fate.

Another dimension to the cultural impairments resulting from the environmental degradation is the loss of societal values and the loss of traditional structures. In the traditional hierarchy of social organization in the Niger Delta, the elders were at the top and the youth at the bottom. But today, the reverse is the case, the traditional rulers and elders have lost their power over the youths, such that the youths are at the helm of affairs and decision makers. The place of traditional rulers and elders has been reduced to mere insignificant position. Jike was accurate in his depiction of the phenomenon;

[T]he typical Niger Delta youth sees the elder as the epitome of colossal failure in the bid to harness the resources of the area.... The elders represents an era that is best forgotten, an era when elders turned a blind eye when multinational companies began in earnest to desecrate and plunder ancestral homelands, an era where a massive oil spillage with untold environmental consequences could be hushed up with a paltry compensation sum of N5,000 and a bottle of gin (2004, 696-697).

Aghalino commented that before the advent of the oil industry, “youths unquestionably followed the dictates of the elders (1994). The elders who are meant to be the hallmark of discipline are now mute in all the actions taken by their youth and this silence of the elders over the youthful activities and power enthronement results to a further social problem, the case of militancy in the Niger Delta. The United Nations Development Programme reports that “the youth in the Niger Delta have worked out their own largely unsustainable ways of reaching and dealing with the oil companies, government at every level, and national and international organizations (UNDP 2006). Douglas in further explication of the activities of the youth and the reason behind their militancy act writes, “our struggle is militant without being military. The majority of Nigerians do not want to address the Niger Delta problem. So we must struggle for rights, our struggle is for democracy. It is for true federation; to control what is ours, to control our resources (1999, 66). The issue of militancy will not be treated here because it is outside our scope of study, but the issue remains that the agitations in the Niger Delta is basically due to oil spillage in the region which contaminates their environment, and the oil companies and government have failed to address the issue adequately, thus the youth took it upon themselves to fight for true federation, for democracy.

In a speech presented by His Excellency, Sen. (Dr.) Bukola Saraki at the Niger Delta and National Development Working Group of the Nigeria US Bi-national commission Rivers State. He expressed his fear over the state of Ogoniland environment:

As I said earlier I was here earlier to visit Ogoniland. I am now a living witness. I came I saw and I was horrified. I knew the situation wasn't good but I was not prepared for something as grim as what I met on ground. I saw little children swim and bath in very badly polluted estuaries in the Niger-Delta. I saw one emerge from a stream looking the more drenched in the crude oil that his body shown so bright under the hot sun. I had another encounter with a woman who it appeared had no option than to use crude-oil-saturated stream to process the little cassava she had gotten from her farm. I saw large expanse of land completely desolate and virtually dead as a result of oil spill (2012).

3. The Traditional Ecological Thought of Niger-Delta People

Callicott, an American Professor of Environmental Philosophy, in recognition of the necessity of indigenous cultures in formulation of an environmental ethics, and as the foundation of environmental ethics, writes:

The revival and deliberate construction of environmental ethics from the raw materials of indigenous, traditional and contemporary cognitive cultures represents an important and essential first step in the future movement of human material cultures toward a more symbiotic relationship, however incomplete and imperfect, with the natural environment (1997, 73).

Ikeke stressing on the need for a traditional foundation of environmental ethics, stresses that "traditional ecological knowledge comes from a community's time tested experiences and observation of reality in that particular community...people do not just come up with traditional ecological knowledge by guessing or argument (2012, 94). In other words, traditional ecological knowledge is an articulated thought gained from the cultural experiences of a people. These methods are employed by the people because it has proven to them to be the best feasible and pragmatic way of addressing their environmental crises and sustaining life in their environment from generation to generation. Emphasizing on the need to inculcate the traditional ecological knowledge in sustaining the environment, the United Nations' Rio Declaration on the environment declares that; "indigenous people...have a vital role in environmental management and development because of their knowledge and traditional practices(Omorovie 2012, 96).Omorovie adds that "and their active participation to enhance sustainable development should be encouraged (2012, 96).

In the study of Urhobo indigenous eco thought, Ikeke Omorovie examines the nature of environment or nature in the region. He writes, "Nature is seen as sacred and spiritual. Nature was not simply a thing or a property to be owned or merely consumed (2012, 97). He cited Harvey Sindima, an African ecological theologian, who opines:

It emerges clearly that for African peoples, this is a religious universe. Nature in the broadest sense of the word is not an empty impersonal object or phenomenon; it is filled with religious significance.... This is one of the most fundamental heritages of the African People....The physical and spiritual are but two dimensions of one and the same universe. These dimensions dove-tail into each other to the extent that at times and in places one is apparently more real than, but not exclusive of , the other (2012, 101).

It is paramount to note that like the Africans as whole, the people of Niger Delta are theistic people. This is in line with J.S Mbiti, who stated passionately, “an African man is notoriously religious (2012, 100). Among the people of Niger Delta, the concept of God is shared by almost if not all the peoples, the place of God is highly extolled. Erhuh writing on the nature of God by these people especially the people of Urhoboland, attested to this fact by saying:

Oghene is totally good. There is no evil of any kind in him. He is the giver of all good gifts. He is the giver of life, children, health, wealth, longevity, and good harvest, etc. this can be seen from the names given to children, Ogheneekewe (God gave me), ‘Eseoghene’ (Gift of God), ‘Oghenemarho’ (God is greater than my enemies, rivals, etc), ‘Ejiroghene’ (Praise God), ‘Oghenevwogagan’ (God is almighty/all powerful),... These and many other names of people in Urhoboland reveal how close God is to the heart of people (2012, 102).

Consequently, for the Niger Delta people, the universe, Earth, nature, land, water, soil, animals, plants, galaxies, all stemmed from one Supreme Being, the creator and sustainer of the universe. The critical examination of the eco thought of Urhoboland, which can be extended as the eco thought of the people of Niger Delta, reveals that God is regarded as the creator and controller of things, man is among the creation of God. Thus, it simply reveals the fact that man is a part of the universe of God and not set apart from this universe. He is only accorded a high place among other species. Consequently, in the Niger Delta region, nature is respected because they believe that it was created by God and thus, Sacred. For these people, nature is their ground of being; the people are dependent on nature for their well-being and survival. This is attested by the fact that majority of them are farmers, fishermen and hunters.

It is against this background that we will try to demonstrate that the ecocentrism of pioneered by Aldo Leopold and articulated philosophically by Callicott suit in to the culture of the Niger Deltan people. This is to avoid committing a mistake of borrowing western ideologies blindly, which Friday M. Mboh writes to discourage:

One of the greatest social as well as religious problems facing contemporary Africans is that they are too easily susceptible to

borrowing ideologies and *modus operandi* from other cultures usually without thinking carefully and critically enough about the possible consequences and implications of what they are borrowing. Africans borrow, for instance foreign political and economic schemes, foreign academic programs, foreign religious modes of worship, alien criteria for judging what is right or what is wrong in other words they even borrow alien ethics. That kind of uncritical borrowing has led many African countries to what Joseph Kenny has called ‘identity fluctuation’, by which he means the assimilation of new or outside values (1991, 101-102).

Mboh is not against borrowing western ethics or ideologies, rather he derails at uncritical assimilation of such ideologies without considering its applicability to the African world view. It is the suggestion of this study, that the ecocentric environmental ethic, as pioneered by Aldo Leopold and propagated by J. Baird Callicott, Holmes Rolston and others is suitable and adequate in addressing the issue of oil spillage in the Niger Delta. Callicott writing on the existence of culturally ecological thought, reveals:

A reexamination of human history and pre-history also reveals that the existence of culturally evolved and integrated environmental ethics that served to limit the environmental impact of pre-industrial human technologies. In many indigenous cultures, nature was represented as enspirited or divine, and therefore the direct object of respect or of reverence: in some traditional cultures, nature was the creation of God and hence should be used with care and passed on intact (1997, 73).

Ecocentrism argues for the value of the whole organisms within the ecosystem. It is paramount to note that this ecocentric view is consistent with the African conception of nature in general and Niger Delta in particular. Callicott must be prophetic when he noted that, “most indigenous and traditional environmental ethics also fit the ecocentric mold (1997, 76). Ogungbemi writing in his intellectual work, ‘An African perspective in the Environmental Crisis’, reveals how the traditional African love and respect nature:

In our traditional relationship with nature, man and women recognize the importance of water, land and air management. To our traditional communities the ethics of not taking more than you need from nature is a moral code. Perhaps this explains why earth, forests, rivers and wind and other natural objects are traditionally believed to be both natural and divine. The philosophy behind this belief may not necessarily be religious, but natural means by which the human environment can be preserved. The ethics of care is essential to traditional understanding of environmental protection and conservation (1997, 204).

This reveals that in traditional African community, the reverence or respect for nature is highly admonished. The Niger delta being part of Africa also adopts this ethics of care in conserving the environment. In their conception, nature has value and must be preserve at all sake. This ethics also inculcates the notion of intrinsic value of the ecosystem as advocated by ecocentrism. Ogungbemi put it rightly, “ethics of nature-relatedness asserts that our natural resources do not need man for their existence and functions (1997, 204). In other words, natural resources have value in and for itself, and this value exist whether man is valuing it or not. This implies that man must moderate the way he explores the natural resources and must live in peacefully co-existent with nature, treating it as something with worth and value.

Historically, the people of Niger Delta have their traditional way of conserving nature, but some of these practices are not effective to curb the sophisticated environmental issues prevalent in the region now, especially the oil spillage experienced by them. Thus, there is need for a paradigm shift in these cultural practices, a shift which will still incorporate the traditional ecological thought of these people, a shift that can effectively address the ugly phenomenon faced by these people. It is in need to achieve this shift, that we have adopted the econcentrism environmental ethics of the west to argue that it is consistent with the notion of nature preservation in the Niger Delta region.

5. A Paradigm Shift towards an Environmental Orientation in Niger-Delta

It is the opinion of this paper that beneath the root of environmental degradation in the Niger Delta region is the issue of orientation, values and ethics towards the environment. An anthropocentrically inclined perception of the environment produces a different result from an ecocentrically inclined perception..Mcharg writing on how our values can affect the state of the environment reveals:

...our failure...lies in prevailing values. Show me a man-oriented society in which it is believed that reality exists only because man can perceive it, that the cosmos is a structure erected to support man on its pinnacle, that man exclusively is divine and given dominion over all things, indeed that God is made in the image of man, and I will predict the nature of its cities and their landscapes.... This is the image of the anthropomorphic, anthropocentric man; he seeks not unity with nature but conquest (24, 1969).

It is pertinent to understand that the anthropocentric conception of the environment by the oil multi-nationals companies, the government and individuals on the environmental degradation experienced in the Niger-Delta region has preserved the occurrence of the negative environmental phenomenon in the area. Thus, for an effective resolution of the issue, recourse must be made to a turn in attitudes, behavior and values towards the environment.

At this juncture, we must realize that the environmental degradation in the Niger Delta cannot be solved by the introduction of technology to clean the environment, rather the introduction of a paradigm shift in the value of the environment and natural resources. In bid to achieve solution to the environmental crisis of Niger Delta, it is pertinent not to overlook the culture and tradition of these people. Ikeke puts it rightly, “many African scholars are agreed that African’s path to greatness does not lie in wholesale adoption of western ideologies or strategies (2012, 164). To this effect, Philomena A. Ojomo argues that “a viable environmental ethics that is in agreement with African Ontology (2003, 110). She further argues that:

[G]lobal concerns about current environmental crisis have culminated in some controversial environment ethical theories, among which are normative environmental ethics, sentient ethics, biocentric ethics, ecocentric ethics and eco-feminist ethics. One of the underlying features connecting these environmental ethical theories is their grounding in western perspectives and cultural experiences (2003, 101).

Environmental orientation in the Niger-Delta should incorporate the paradigm of caring for nonhuman species and must consider the extreme exploitation of nonhuman species as an ethical failure. It must be noted that the ethical paradigm as encapsulated in this paper invariably argues for the sustainability of the human species. The ecosystem is an interconnected system, and must be seen as a system where the health of a species is directly or indirectly influenced by the other species. On this note, the health of the ecosystem is paramount and need to be sustained. When we begin to see oil as a property, water as a liquid substance, land as a base for construction, vegetation as a seasonal food element, aquatic lives as a means to satisfy our nutritious needs, then we have place value on these things based on their benefit to man. But, these things do not just exist for man’s sake. The water, oil, natural resources, land, air forms an interconnected web that ensures the sustainability of the ecosystem, so each has a relational relevance. It is because of our perception of these natural resources and element as property, that makes the oil companies exploit the oil in the area to the detriment of the entire ecosystem.

The phenomenon of oil spillage in the Niger Delta is more of value-problem than technological problem. The pollution is a consequence of the exploitative anthropocentric policies adopted by the oil companies and government. The environmental philosophy practiced in the area, if at all there is, is detrimental to the health of the environment, and oil spills persists because of the failure to adopt an appropriate environmental ethics that will include the intrinsic value of other nonhuman species. The environmental degradation will still persist unless the people involved adopt a paradigm shift in their value and relation to the environment. A shift in value will not totally prevent oil spillage, rather it will curtail the excessiveness and as well prompts the oil companies and government to

adopt remedial measures once there is an accidental discharge of oil on the environment.

6. Conclusion

In order to ameliorate the environmental crisis of the Niger Delta region, there must be a turn in values and ethics prevalence in the area. Though, the government and the multi-nationals oil companies operating in the area have employed technological measures in curbing the impacts of the oil spillage, but the study is of the opinion that technology cannot proffer solutions to the phenomenon. Callicott was right at setting things straight when he argues, “the modern technology of nineteenth and twentieth century’s is certainly part of the problem, not the solutions...no coal and oil burning, no greenhouse effects (1996, 11). These technologies are good, but they also are detrimental to human conservation practices. Underlying the adoption of a paradigm shift or the turn to a new ethic of the environment, lies the deep pragmatic question, How can we motivate people to adopt this ethics. The environmental philosophers of the West lament that their set out theories but people seems not to adhere to it, thereby making their endeavors a futile one. Similarly, in the Niger Delta, the same issue is applicable how can we convince people to adopt the eco centric ethic. Callicott lamenting on the issue of the adoption of eco centric environmental ethics, consoles us with his healing words:

Although an ethic- whether environmental as here envisioned, or familiarly social- is never perfectly realized in practice, it does nevertheless exert a very real force on practice..., we are just as unlikely ever to attain a complete and perfect harmony with nature as we are to realize a utopian society, but the existence and institutionalization of an environmental ethic, partly encoded in laws, partly a matter of ethical sensibility and conscience, may draw human behaviour in the direction of that goal. (1996, 67)

Paul Taylor stressed on the need to imbibe in the attitude of respect for nature, he advocated that we should employed the Kantian mode of ethics; the universal principle, “to adopt the attitude of respect for nature is to take a stance that one wills it to be a universal law for all rational beings. It is to hold that stance categorically, as being validly applicable to every moral agent without exception, irrespective of whatever personal feelings toward nature such an agent have or might have (2020, 203). Consequently, the government should make laws that will regulate the activities of the multinationals oil companies in the oil field and wells. The Study concurs with Callicott, when he states, “I therefore suggest, the body of current national and international environmental law and regulation (1997, 67). Thus, the establishment of environmental law that will restrict the activities of oil companies, and as well prohibit their operation in some certain environmental sensitive areas is paramount in Niger Delta.

The study argues for a paradigm shift in the value of the environment. The environment is not a commodity to be used by humans carelessly, rather caution

should be applied. To apply this caution, humans must shift from their anthropocentric conception of the environment; that mess up the environment, to an eco centric conception of the environment, as this will ensure a healthy environment which invariably will benefit man. An eco centric value argues that all forms of life is significant, demanding respect regardless of its worth to human.

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