

## Niger Delta Poetry as Mainstream Nigerian Poetry

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### Abstract

This paper explores Niger Delta poetry as part of mainstream Nigerian poetry. It traces the emergence of Nigerian poetry tradition and locates Niger Delta poetry as a tradition within a tradition. Using minority discourse and environmentalism as analytical tools, this paper examines the environmental and social conditions of the Niger Delta people as represented in poetry. Ojaide's *Delta Blues and Home Songs*, Ikiriko Iyawari's *Oily Tears of the Delta*, Akachi Adimora-Eziegbo's *Heart Songs*, and Hygenius Ekwuazi's *That Other Country* are the primary texts selected for this study. The first two texts are written by Niger Delta poets and the last two are written by non-Niger Delta poets, representing the double-lensed views of this discourse. The paper traces development of poetry tradition in Nigeria and in the process argues against the assumption that Niger Delta poets are the custodian of Niger Delta poetry. It states that the poetry on the Niger Delta environmental crisis written by non-Nigerian Deltans adequately depict the environmental crisis of that region and that the centrality of the techniques used in the development of themes contribute in making Niger Delta poetry part of the mainstream Nigerian poetry. This paper therefore, reveals that though the geographical space that Niger delta poetry captures is a minority, its themes are central to the socio-political problems of Nigeria. Thus, Nigerian poets, regardless of their region, have positioned their poetic imaginations to the service of a region that has witnessed one of the uncanny environmental destructions in the history of Nigeria.

**Keywords:** Niger Delta, Minority, Mainstream and Environment

### Introductio

The multi-ethnic nature of the Nigerian state has created a binary structure that assigns a majority or minority status to its citizens. The Hausa-Fulani, the Igbo, and the Yoruba are privileged as the majorities, while the rest of the ethnic nationalities constitute the de-privileged minorities. Unfortunately, the same binary structure has shaped the notion and taxonomization of Nigerian literature. Niger Delta poetry is thus an offshoot of Nigerian poetry. It exists within the wider corpus of Nigerian poetry; a tradition that dates back to the aesthetic appraisal of oral traditional forms of poetry. As is the case with the emergence of African poetry, written poetry in Nigeria was modelled after modern European poetic forms while tapping from the oral traditional forms.

Thus, the uniqueness of Nigerian poetry derives from a mixture of oral traditional elements and elements of European poetry tradition. As a mark of commitment to plausible representation, writers such as Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe, Christopher Okigbo, and J. P. Clark in their works have drawn from their folkloric traditions to make cultural and political statements against European colonization and against the post-independence disillusionment and neo-colonial tendencies that have engulfed the Nigerian socio-political environment. It is against the backdrop of this commitment to plausible representation that the Niger Delta poetry evolved. However, the central question remains, to what extent do poets from outside the region capture the realities that confront the people of the region?

### **Analytical Framework**

This paper adopts minority discourse and environmentalism as its literary tools. Minority discourse theory is identified with emergent and cultural works of non-mainstream, non-European writers, and cultures (Roger Fowler 9). It is a theory that has many influences from poststructuralism, postcolonialism, and other schools of thought. Critics such as Walter Benjamin, Michael Foucault, George Lukas, and Antonio Gramsci; have contributed to the growth of this theory. The general notion of minority discourse is that when national literature is produced, there is the awakening of the smaller minorities within the societies who are also fighting to be heard within the construct of national literature. These minorities can be ethnic minorities, women, children, or regional minorities. In other words, these minorities have to fight for social justice and equality in their own countries after a major fight against the colonial centre. It implies a fight against a dominant force of oppression in their own space, as they are doubly suppressed owing to their backwardness or marginalised disposition.

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's *Towards a Minor Literature* is an important exposition on minority discourse. The work argues that there are three grounds to judge minority literature, which are: minor literature is affected by a high level of coefficient of deterritorialisation, everything in minor literature is political, and everything takes a collective value. (16) The first point has been a major point of discourse for decades in postcolonial studies. However, the second and third points are relevant to the Niger Delta situation because the poetry coming from the region is political and at the same time represents the collective value of the region, that is, it symbolizes the reality and concerns of the people of that region. The validity of this theory comes to the fore in the way and manner the poets of that region constitute themselves as the mouthpiece for this minority group that has suffered because of oil exploration and exploitation in that region.

This paper also adopts environmentalism as a theory to explore the nature imperatives in the Niger Delta poetry. Environmentalism is a theory or social movement that advocates for the preservation, restoration, and improvement of the natural elements or processes such as climate change, control of pollution, protection of plant and animal as well as balancing the relation between humans and the various natural systems (Lorraine Elliot 1).

Environmentalists believe that green issues, however important they are, can be addressed within the existing political and economic structures. To succeed, this would require wise government decisions, appropriate legislation, and the voluntary adoption of environmental practices. One of the pitfalls of environmentalism as observed over the years is that it has no clear political and ideological agenda which makes critics view it from different lenses.

The viability of the application of both theories lies in the intersection between the region's minority status and the environmental abuse they suffer. To belong to a minority is to suffer negligence. For the Niger Delta people, the abuse of their environment stands out as the physical evidence of the neglect they suffer as a minority people, thus, doing justice to a critique of the representation of the region requires a double-lensed criticism.

### **The Development of Poetry Tradition in Nigeria**

The body of writings known as modern Nigerian poetry is rooted in the oral tradition form. Poets, most notably Dennis Osadebey and Nnamdi Azikiwe set the pace and pioneered new Nigerian poetry in English. Unlike its oral counterpart, this form mirrored the socio-political atmosphere of the time with a nationalist undertone. These poets wrote poems that were made public through radios and newspapers. These first generation poets schooled within Nigeria which provided a training ground for them to exhibit maturity and mastery of European style and form. Poets such as Wole Soyinka, Christopher Okigbo, Gabriel Okara and J.P. Clark-Bekederemo impressed the outside world as they attempted to reverse the Eurocentric notions about Africa

These poets adopted different strategies in their poetry; one of such is the use of oral tradition. For instance, Christopher Okigbo's "Idoto" explores the transcendental experience with the goddess Idoto, which symbolically implies a search for unity with the African gods. Wole Soyinka and J.P. Clark explored the Abiku myth from different ideological perspectives, thus giving an ambivalent position of an African traditional belief. However, second-generation poets break away from the first generation through the way they prioritize social commitment, and their literary works were not tailored after the European style as observed with their predecessors. The second-generation poets situate poetry to the service of the average person in the society. These poets so approach poetry because they are witnesses to the country's declining economies as a result of bad leadership, having witnessed the Nigerian Civil War, military coups, military/civilian dictatorships, and other forms of social, economic, and political instability. These experiences shaped their poetry in terms of ideology and commitment. Some of the second-generation poets include Niyi Osundare, Tanure Ojaide, Odia Ofeimun, Onyora Ossie Eneke and Catherine Acholonu. These poets also explored the intolerable gap between the rich and the poor, the haves and the have-nots (Egya Sule 8).

Many of the poets, including, Niyi Osundare, Akomaye Oko, and Tanure Ojaide absorb their respective ethnic literatures into their poetry. In their poetry, form is not rated above content as seen in the preceding generation. It is significant to state that it was during this period that poets in Nigeria began to write about the environment from a radical perspective. During this period, texts that focused on nature like Niyi Osundare's *Eye of the Earth* and Tanure Ojaide's *Labyrinth of the Delta* were written. *Labyrinth of the Delta* opens up the tradition of more committed poetry with Niger Delta environmental problems as focus, and the third-generation poets from the region easily followed suit.

The third-generation poets to a larger extent tailored their works after the second-generation poets; the obvious difference between the two is that the poets of the latter are much younger at that time. Nevertheless, both the second and third generation poets from the Niger Delta are more audacious in using poetry to criticize the government of the day and situate their poetry to the service of the Niger Delta people. Their works include Ebinyo Ogbowei's *Let the Honey*

*Run*; Ebi Yeibo's *Forbidden Tongues*, Barine Ngaage's *Rhythms of Crisis*, Ikiriko's *Oily Tear of the Delta*. Ogaga Ifowodo's *The Oil Lamp* etc.

According to Nwahunanya, these works:

Collectively, part of the point they make is that the experience of the Niger Delta is clear evidence of neo-colonialism, deliberate government neglect and marginalisation of the minorities, and a manifestation of the merger of foreign bourgeois interests and a local elite comprador class, a situation that would keep generating protest if not permanently addressed (xviii).

In essence, these writers have placed poetry in the service of society by allowing it to perform political, environmental, and cultural functions.

Furthermore, since the judicial murder of Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight other indigenous leaders from that region by the despotic Sani Abacha junta in 1995 over trumped-up charges, more literary works have been produced, both by writers from the region and outside the region on the environmental problems of the Niger Delta. Therefore, the outlook of Niger Delta poetry broke from the confines of the Niger Delta poets to becoming a major topic within the tradition of Nigerian poetry.

### **Niger Delta Poetry as Minority Tradition within the Nigeria Poetry Tradition**

Niger Delta poetry is attributed to belonging to the Niger Delta people. This is so because the poets from that region are bred in that environment and are also witnesses to the region's environmental carnage. Thus, they bring these experiences to bear in their poetic imaginations. However, Niger Delta poetry has moved beyond that confine. It should rather be referred to as the works produced about the region.

It is unique poetry and it is set in the Niger Delta or takes themes from the experiences of the people of that region to create a distinct tradition in Nigerian poetry. According to Tanure Ojaide:

Niger Delta is a regional and bioregional and social-cultural area that has a uniqueness of its own that sets it aside from other parts of Nigeria... it is imbued with the common and shared experience of self-affirmation, resistance to majority domination and multinational exploitation, and oppression and a defense of the piece of the earth the people call their own (*Speaking* 56)

The above statement is a concise description of the uniqueness of the Niger Delta region, which its indigenes and non-indigenes have thematised in their works. Niger Delta is not synonymous with the political expression called the South-South of Nigeria as many would want to assume. It is rather a geographical description of old Warri/Delta Province, which includes Anionma and Aniocha areas. It comprises Rivers, Akwa Ibom, Edo, Bayelsa and Cross River States (Ojaide *Seriously Speaking* 57), and some parts of Ondo State. What unite and describe them as a geographical entity are the shared experiences of the people with the environment, the effect of the activities of multinational oil companies in that region; and the determination of the people to defend the environment which they see as their home.

Niger Delta poetry is not just all about the setting but it is also influenced by Nigerian politics. The Nigerian political experience from the colonial down to the postcolonial informed the Nigerian literary experience. Thus, there cannot be a successful discussion of Nigerian poetry without factoring in the political, historical, and human experience which has been the norm even since the 1960s. So also, there cannot be a successful exposition on Niger Delta poetry without factoring in politics. In Nigeria, politics connects all other aspects of life. Umeh Okonwko affirms that "Politics has constituted a major influence on modern Nigerian poetry" (46). Politics in this context involves how these poets have responded to the socio-political, cultural, economic and other issues affecting human development. Therefore, since the wider issue of politics constitutes part of Niger Delta poetry, poets within and outside the region draw from politics into their poetic oeuvres in projecting the environmental problems of that region.

Poetry with themes of politics has been identified with Nigerian poets since its inception. For instance, Christopher Okigbo in *Path of Thunder* adopts political and public themes to comment on the unstable political situation in Nigeria that culminated in the civil war. In 'Hurry for Thunder', Okigbo uses the elephant as a symbol for the federal government and illustrates its brute force with the image of pulling four trees to the ground. The four trees represent the then four regions of Nigeria that would soon be engulfed by war. Okigbo's poetic trajectory established that they have been a matrix of political tradition in Nigeria poetry. It is a tradition that Niger Delta poets have incorporated into their poetry. For instance, a poet like Joe Usher uses *A Reign of Locust* reflects politics in his poetic trajectory. He explores the happenings in Nigerian politics with ceaseless allusions and the overriding metaphor of the locust. Having linked politics to environmental problems in the Niger Delta, he describes the Nigerian politicians as the vulture, hyena, tiger, lion, and dragon in order to explore incidences of extra-judicial murder, corruption, and destruction of the Niger Delta region. Therefore, the rootedness of Niger Delta poetry in politics gives non-Niger Delta poets a stand to write poetry that interface the political and the setting of that region. These poets who include Akachi Adimora, Ezeigbo, Tayo Olafioye, Hyginus Ekuwazi among others have tailored their works in that direction. Thereby, they represent genuine interest from outside the region writing about the environmental crisis in that region.

In the 1980s during the military era, politics, as it relates to the military, was a hegemony discourse that Niger Delta poetry had to respond to. The military rulers were complicit with the multinational oil corporations in the environmental degradation and marginalization of the Niger Delta, from where the nation derived over 85% of its foreign revenue. Poems that are written during the military era became a counter-hegemony discourse in the face of military dominance for the minority region. Tanure Ojaide's *Delta Blues and Home Songs* featured a poem titled "Delta Blues" to bemoan the fate of the Niger Delta people as a minority in a pluralistic, multivalent, nation-state like Nigeria. Within this unfair political chart, the majority often hold the reign of power at the federal level while the Niger Delta people and their environment are the victims in this whole process. Ojaide conjures the image of the systematic destruction of the region by the military in "Delta Blues" with words such as: "trees beheaded", "streams mortally poisoned" (21) to underscore the problem of being a neglected minority group. Also, his "When Green was the Lingua France" reveals that the extraction of crude oil from the land as well as gas flaring activities that followed gave birth to the gradual annihilation of the region's biodiversity. It reads:

Then shell broke the bond  
With quells and a hell  
Of flares. Stoking a hearth  
Under God's very behind (13)

Thus, Shell British Petroleum with the collaboration of the Nigerian military government is indicted for the environmental destruction of the region. The Niger-Delta environment is preyed on by foreign oil investors without considering the people and the environment. There is therefore the collaboration of the military force cum the foreign oil conglomerate to ensure that the exploitation and militarization of the region go hand in hand. Ojaide, through his poetry voices the genuine interest of the Niger Deltans about their region's environmental problems.

However, Akachi Adimora-Eziegbo, though not from that region gives a powerful rendition of the situation of women in the region as a result of environmental degradation. The emotion and style adopted reveal that she can interpret the depth of the problems in that region just like any other Niger Delta poet would have done. In *Heart Songs*, the poem titled "Violated Ogoni Women" is filled with lacrimation. She chants about the suffering of women of Ogoniland in the Niger Delta:

Sisters, sisters, sisters  
three times I call you  
tears flow down  
as blood flows  
.....  
you watch  
your daughters  
ravaged  
by men armed  
to the teeth  
some younger you: (124)

Thus, her focus was on women who suffered rape and other forms of abuse as a result of the presence of the Nigerian military who were out there to protect oil interest on behalf of the Nigerian federal government. She graphically uses enjambment to connote the barbarism of the military. She describes them as: /armed/ to the teeth//men of blood-drinking/ spree. Virgin's hymen/ torn to shreds/ with violence/impunity! (16-23). Adimora Ezeigbo thus hits at the conscience of the Nigerian government about the suffering of women and the use of military force in that region. The poem demonstrates that the problem that women face with the military in that region is an extension of the larger Nigerian problem as it relates to women and the military. Also, in "Ram Syndrome" she attacks the use of naked power by dictators to crush defenseless people like Ken Saro-Wiwa who was hanged by the Abacha's junta because of his relentless efforts over the crisis in the region. Akachi placed Ken alongside other victims of this brute force. Those in that category include Amadou Diallo, Bola Ige, Moshood Abiola etc. She laments that:

Lizard does not  
Visit a hedge  
Where cat

takes a nap:  
Ask Bola Ige  
Who does not know  
that jackal does not  
Forgive an affront?  
ask freedom choirmaster  
Moshood Abiola (16)

From the lines above, Akachi reiterates that the use of brute force has brought down many of those who were regarded as voices for the voiceless. Akachi Adimora represents voices outside the region that are using the larger problems of the society to relate the agitations and problems of the Niger Delta region.

Niger Delta poets as a distinct marker and identity incorporate oral tradition as part of their shared experience into their works. Poets such as Tanure Ojaide, Onookome Kome, Ebi Yeibo have adopted their oral tradition to express the environmental concerns of the region. Ojaide for instance incorporates the Udje oral art into his work. His work: *Poetry Performance and Art: Udje Dance Songs of the Urhobo People* is an extensive work on this important oral form. Udje song-poetry tradition is one of the many sources where he draws inspiration from and makes an invocation to gods such as Uhamwha or Aridon (the patron god of poets and music). As part of their indebtedness to oral tradition, Onookome Okome's *Mamiwata Poems* also reveals the belief in the river goddess that dwells in the sacred groves of the region. Also, Ibiwari Ikirko's poetry represents the way and manner poets from that region incorporate oral tradition to relate the environmental crisis of that region. In Ikiriko's "Everything Already" (I-IV) and "Ikikali," in *Oil Tears of the Delta* re-enact the attempt to connect the gods of that region with resistance. Right from the beginning of "Everything Already", there is a strong urge, which must be the ancestral gods nudging the poet to contribute to the campaign against the illegality that is ongoing in the environment. Resisting such urge becomes impossible for the poet and having a shared affinity with the environment, he has to stand and become a truthful witness to the injustices that have characterised the existence of the region since the discovery of oil. In the poem, the gods actually urge him to speak. Ikiriko thus sings:

I had listened  
To the voices within me  
To the voices around me  
That I am a time-bomb  
Now I realize  
That I am an oil bean seed (11)

There is constant use of repetition: /I had listen / to the voices around me/ (8-9) to buttress that the call to promote environmental struggle is beyond personal grudge but that which is communal. The poet sees himself as being chosen by the water-spirit to sear the conscience of the exploiters about the harm being done to their region. The repetitive use of the personal pronoun "I" also indicates a transition from a personal call to fulfil a collective purpose. He opines: And I know why I live/ to say these things are still to do/ cares/ clamping weight of cares/ (23-26). This

love for the region which he described as: /before, behind, within and around him/ (27-28) also spurred him to speak for the region that is decimated by environmental problems.

Nevertheless, such indebtedness by Ikiriko validates the argument that Niger Delta poets write from the premise of their rich oral traditions in exploring environmental issues, a position which has been assumed to give them an advantage over poets from outside the region writing about the Niger Delta. However, Niger Delta poets' indebtedness to oral tradition does not invalidate the contributions of writers who are not from that region who explore the region's environmental predicament from their respective perspectives. Writers who are not from that region like Helon Habila and Hygenius Ekwuazi have produced texts with themes from the Niger Delta region to buttress that the literary production about that region, is not only from those from that region. For instance, Hygenius Ekwuazi's *That Other Country* has a large chunk of his poems dedicated to the trauma of the Nigerian Civil War. However, he also dedicated some of the poems to the Niger Delta environmental crisis, and thereby revealing the trauma of living in an environment that is affected by oil spills. Some of the poems are: "I Must Go and Find the Peace of that Night," "The Dream" and "Pictures I've Tucked away in my Memory". "The last poem is a vivid and realistic examination of the Niger Delta setting under the siege of oil spills. Ekwuazi connects the trauma of the Nigerian Civil War to the trauma of oil related crises in the Niger Delta. He says:

In the creeks  
They continue with gas flaring  
And the people still cook with faggots  
Of wet mangrove

In the creeks  
They have given away homesteads  
And farmlands and sacred grooves  
And called them oil wells-  
Every barrel of oil from those wells  
Bubbles with anger...  
And the fire in the creeks-  
They set my memory on fire  
And they overhear my pillow at night..(36)

The graphic description above reveals that though Ekwuazi may not be a child of the Deltas, he demonstrates a deeper understanding of the environment. Through the use of vivid imageries and personifications, we see the anger and the pains of the farmlands and sacred grooves because of oil spills. He thus connects our memory to the environmental problems of that region. Also, in "Dream" Ekwuazi opens up the readers to the unconscious where dreams come alive to communicate the suppressed feelings of greed and self-centeredness that have become the hallmark of Nigerian politicians. In the dream, the persona saw someone at the zenith of a "long, long reedy pole reaching/ up to the very distant skies" (2-3). There in the skies are stars "like a giant football field/ aglow with fire-flies". The persona was given the power to pluck the stars effortlessly. He placed as many he could pluck in his pocket. "all of the bright and twinkling" (11-12). Thus, he looked down and saw thousands of people shouting at him, expecting him to at least

throw some stars down. He however refused to the consternation of all. Reason was that: "none of them is wearing that tribal /mark which my father gave me" (18-19). The poetic narration became interesting when the persona discovered that there are moons up there, that with a further climb of the reedy pole he could get them in his pocket. He made the effort and instead of him to at least throw the stars to those down the reed. The persona hanged the star back in the sky and he woke up when: "the shaking of the reed becomes more violent" (32). Such narration that is induced by trauma reveals that the Niger Delta problem is an extension of larger political problems in Nigeria that is driven by greed. It is therefore the lack of political will by the Nigerian government that makes the environmental crisis in the region to have persisted.

One can further argue that it is the trauma of the Nigerian Civil War that is extended in the depiction of the Niger Delta environmental crisis. The findings of this paper reveal that although Niger Delta poets as a mark of identity incorporate their oral tradition into their works. Does not in any way invalidate the possibilities that poets from outside the region are making of the Niger Delta situation. Akachi has brought an aspect of her feminism in revealing the women that are suffering among other issues, and Ekwuazi engaged the region's problem from a trauma perspective, and positioning it as an extension of the Biafran crisis. Both Ekwuazi and Akachi have arguably portrayed the Niger delta problems as an offshoot of the general Nigerian problem.

## Conclusion

The environmental issues of the Niger Delta have elicited much poetic response from poets from within and outside the region because of the region's strategic importance to the Nigerian economy. Since the environmental problem of that region is a representation of a larger socio-political problem in Nigeria, writers from different regions have used their poetry to contribute to the fight for environmental justice in that region.

What started as a minority discourse from the Niger Delta region is presently being mainstreamed by non-Nigerian poets as part of commitments and advocacy for environmental justice for the region. Niger Delta poetry can no longer be restricted to the literary works of writers from the region because of the proliferation of works on that region from different parts of the country. Niger Delta poetry is now subsumed as part of mainstream Nigerian poetry.

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