

NIGER DELTA DRAMA AND NIGER DELTA PLAYWRIGHTS FROM 1950 TO 1999 AND 2000 TILL DATE

Ebinepere Ekiye Zibokere

Department of Theatre Arts

Niger Delta University

ebipretti@gmail.com

DOI:[10.13140/RG.2.2.21005.15840](https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.21005.15840)

Abstract

Niger Delta Drama is an issue based drama affecting the people of the Niger Delta. These issues as environmental degradation and abject poverty that have resulted in continued violence in the region. No writer or drama critic can talk about the Niger Delta Drama without an adequate understanding of the history of the Niger Delta region and its inhabitants. This paper looks into the history of the Niger Delta and its people for the aim of gaining better understanding of a Niger Delta Drama and the sources or drivers of conflict in the Niger Delta. It then lists a number of playwrights from 1950 to 1999 and 2000 till date in order to debunk the arguments about the non-existence of Niger Delta dramas before contemporary times. The paper concludes by referring to a Niger Delta drama as an artistic creation that candidly records and exposes the disheartening existential predicament of the Niger Delta people and the methods the aggrieved youths in the region have adopted in the bid to fight against the oppressive powers that have become their succubus.

Keywords: Niger Delta; Drama; Agitation; Playwright

Introduction

Drama (also known as a play) refers to a tale narrated in dialogue by performers before an audience. Oftentimes, when drama is mentioned, the first picture that comes to mind is a stage set in the theatre where performers act out the different roles in which they have been cast. But, drama goes beyond the theatre and this, perhaps, informs Spencer's statement that, "imagination shrivels and shrinks if it is not nourished by the negotiations that occur between dimensions of reality" (p3). Dramatists or playwrights (for example, Wole Soyinka, Nduka Onwugbute, Awam Amkpa, Keziah Jones and Lindsay Barrett) in Nigeria take on the role of educators who advocate for and are facilitators of properly structured drama experiences that create room for their audience to see, feel and taste the contexts in which their stories are situated. But even with such role, not much recognition

has been accorded to the playwrights in the Niger Delta and the Niger Delta drama. What then is the Niger Delta?

The Niger Delta is the Delta of the Niger Delta River sitting directly on the bight of Biafra side of the Gulf of Guinea on the Atlantic Ocean in Nigeria (<https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Niger-Delta>). Azaiki mentions that the Niger Delta spreads out into the Gulf of Guinea between the bight (Bay) of Benin and the Bight of Biafra. It covers more than 10,000 square miles, and has a shoreline of about 200 miles of its fourteen main tributaries (p52). He adds that the Niger Delta may be the largest wetland in Africa (p39). The Niger Delta houses over 8 million people in the Deltaic region (that's, it is a natural creation, not just limited to being an Oil Producing region) of Nigeria. This statement finds support in the 2006 census conducted in Nigeria which records the core Niger Delta states with population as follows: Bayelsa State 1,703,358, Delta State 4, 098,391 and Rivers State 5, 185, 400 (NPC, 2006). The Niger Delta is also rich in crude oil deposit and this region which, over the years, provides the major source of Nigeria's wealth and sustainability has been misrepresented historically.

While some Nigerians define the Niger Delta from a political standpoint (that's, based on its natural resource and revenue generated for distribution to various zones/regions), others hold a geographical view (that's, definition based solely on latitude, continental position, altitude and local regional topography such as nearly mountains) of the region without any consideration for its historical make up. Emphasis is continually placed on oil exploration and the political elites in the scheme of things appear to play down on the extreme deprivation of the region while favoring personal political gains. In order to completely grasp and appreciate the present context, it is pertinent to look into the history of the region in order to understand the root causes of conflict, which forms majority of the themes in Niger Delta Dramas.

A brief history of the Niger Delta

The Niger Delta history dates back to the 11th century when the region's first city states, that's Benin and Oyo, were first created. Both the Benin and Oyo kingdoms, as they were referred, quickly broke forth into independent trading giants and they were in charge of the coastal ports along what is known today as the Niger Delta. Subsequently, the Benin kingdom expanded, having approximately 100,000 inhabitants and with this urbanization came cultural, artistic and commercial development (with political and religious power residing

with the 'Oba'). Outside of Benin, the Niger Delta was a group of regions led by distinct tribes and kings, for instance, Ijaw (the majority group in the Niger Delta), Igbos, Delta, Oron, Urhobo and Isoko. And before the arrival of the Europeans in the late 15th century, these communities carried out trade activities with each other.

Then the Portuguese navigated their way to the Niger Delta, coming into contact with the locals in 1471. This contact boosted trade exchanges of peppers, slaves and ivory for textiles, coral beads and other valuables from the Portuguese. With this social and economic inflow, the Niger Delta saw the establishment of markets both internal and external that led to the setting up of new cities and states. The Niger Delta people were very successful in palm oil trade and as the European population grew in the region, demands for the palm oil based products as butter and soaps skyrocketed, thereby boosting the need for this natural oil.

The Europeans, particularly the British, started to explore and charter the Niger Delta territory and rivers for potential trade activities. Between 1846 and 1925, George Goldie founded the United African Company with the motive to dominate, profit from and exercise control over the region with little or no regard for the communities in the Niger Delta. Soon, the lower Niger River, a key trade route, was in the control of Goldie and other European organizations that operated in the area. Even though treaties were signed between Goldie and the tribal leaders along the Niger and Benue Rivers, against verbal agreement restricting activities to the coastal areas, they still penetrated the mainland. In 1886, the company's name was changed to "The National Africa Company" after it had been granted a royal charter, giving it full authority to administer the Niger Delta and the country on the banks of the Niger and Benue Rivers. Again, the company was renamed "The Royal Niger Company".

This new trade relationship led to some level of agitation amongst the Niger Delta middle men (who originated from distinct tribes and regions) because commercial competition arose due to the European traders' preference of intermediates that presented the best trade opportunity for their own profit. Between 1894 and 1895, King William Koko of Nembe spoke against the Royal Niger Company's efforts to exclude the Nembe people from the booming palm oil trade. This particular incident is worthy of note as it records the feeling of imposition felt by the people of the Niger Delta in the 19th century.

With the British Colonial rule in Nigeria came an expansion in oil exploration activities, particularly with the invention of combustion engines which saw the novel applications of oil and oil based products in the 1890s. In 1914, it was officially stated that any oil and mineral found in the Nigerian soil (as one of Britain's colonies) was legally owned by the crown. Between 1903 and 1935, the partnership between Shell and the Anglo Iranian Oil Company (now BP) named as Sell-D'Arcy Exploration Parties (SDEP) led the way for exploration via the geological surveys of the Niger Delta. These surveys soon paid off as the first oil well in commercial quantity was struck in Oloibiri Town of Bayelsa State in 1956. This was another significant period in the history of the Niger Delta and Nigeria as a country. Before long, three regional administrative divides were mapped out along ethnic lines: *The Hausa Fulani of the North, Igbos of the East and the Yorubas of the West*, while the large ethnic minorities of the South like the Ijaws were left out from the plans of the majority group. Tensions built up in the Niger Delta people as they were excluded from participating with the major ethnic groups at the center and this did not sit well with them. This marginalization has, for long, been the origin of deprivation of the region both economically, socially and politically.

And after independence in 1960, the marginalization of the Niger Delta region and its people remained unattended. There was still tension over the uneven distribution of wealth gotten from the drillings and extraction of oil from the land of the Niger Delta peoples. To resist this continued unjust treatment, a radical armed militia known as the Niger Delta Volunteer Force (NDVF) led by Isaac Adaka Boro was birthed. Like the Biafrans, the group attempted to emancipate the region as the Niger Delta Republic but both Boro and his militia were soon captured and imprisoned for treason. Isaac Adaka Boro's failed struggle paved way for other struggles of similar cause. An example is the Ken Saro Wiwa led movement for the survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP). He called for a non-violent approach to tackle the extreme poverty and pollution of their land resulting from the exploration activities of Shell. Again, Ken Saro Wiwa's struggle was not successful and his death in 1995 exposed the depth of injustice meted out on the people of the Niger Delta.

The death of General Sani Abacha in 1996 brought an end to military rule in Nigeria. Chief Olsegun Obasanjo became the first democratically elected president in the country. A new form of activism emerged after Saro Wiwa's death. There was a shift from the non-violent approach to the violent. The new

groups took on arms and fought against the multinational companies and government through pipeline vandalism, kidnapping, oil bunkering and piracy. Such was the level of criminality that became characteristic of the Niger Delta. The year 2004 saw an increase in the level of militancy in the region as armed and gang conflicts became commonplace in Port Harcourt. This new form of violent approach was spurred by deep rooted grievances based on the injustice of inequality, international and government neglect of the region, extreme poverty from government corruption, unemployment of youths unable to provide for their families and political dissatisfaction. Hence, the militants kidnapped the foreign oil workers, destroyed pipelines and this automatically increased the oil price above \$100 per barrel.

In 2009, the government led the Amnesty Process and an estimated 26,000 militants agreed to a ceasefire. But, when the deep causes of the injustice (environmental, social, political, historical and economical) carried out on the Niger Delta and her people is not adequately dealt with, the supposed peace brought about by the Amnesty process (still ongoing till date) will remain fragile. It is ironic that till date, the Niger Delta people are still viewed as second class citizens in an independent Nigeria they had helped the British to create. It is even more disheartening to observe that the oil, which should be a blessing, has turned into a curse as the Niger Delta people sit on wealth but lack control over their God-given natural resource. It is therefore, the reconciliation of these injustices (noted from history till date), the transition beyond the past evils spurred by the resource curse and the restoration of balance to the inequality experienced by the people in the Niger Delta that form the basis of the Niger Delta Dramas.

What is NIGER DELTA Drama?

Niger Delta Drama is an issue based drama that addresses the issues affecting the people of Niger Delta. To buttress, Niger Delta dramas tell stories about the experiences of the Deltaic people and their degradation of their environment. For some time now, contemporary dramas have concentrated on the crises that have ravaged the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. A major reason for this is the fact that the Niger Delta accounts for almost 90% of Nigeria's wealth. Etiowo lends support to this statement stating that,

Oil from the region is said to have been the bedrock of building and transformation of Nigeria's former and present capitals- Lagos and Abuja,

respectively. The wealth of the nation, both at individual and collective levels, is traceable to the economic fortunes of oil in the Niger Delta (p.139).

Ironically, the people in the Niger Delta have been the least beneficiaries of the wealth derived from their area. Instead, the region and its people are plagued with poverty, neglect (from the oil companies and the Nigerian government) and violence; and this has prevented any meaningful development, whether human and infrastructure. Abah confirms this when she observes that,

Since the discovery of an oil well in oloibiri in 1956, the Delta has been eyed and explored by various multinational petroleum companies. The oil industry is responsible for over 80% of Nigeria's wealth. Despite such huge earnings, it is said that much of these proceed to only 1% of the population. In addition to the environmental degradation and community displacement caused by the oil companies in the region, the corruption over oil revenues has been the source of various conflicts over the years. (p.2)

Thus, contemporary Niger Delta playwrights, both from within and outside the Delta, have deemed it necessary to bring the challenges of the region into their artistic works, that's Niger Delta Dramas.

Niger Delta dramas, therefore, are those dramas that capture the totality of the Niger Delta peoples' experiences while criticizing the ills that the region is fraught with and open those issues for both international and national discourse. Isaac Adaka Boro and Ken Saro Wiwa, the environmental activist and writer, who inherited his ideologies of emancipating the Niger Delta people, were the first persons to expose the challenges of the Niger Delta to the world and their lives were lost to the cause. Plays like *Wives Revolt* by J.P. Clark, *Hangmen Also Die* by Esiaba Irobi, *Hard Ground* by Ahmed Yerimah etc. deal with the complex nature of the challenges or issues of crises in the Niger Delta. Like the aforementioned plays, other Niger Delta Dramas showcase the culture of the Niger Delta people and highlight the thematic engagement and concerns of the writers, whether from 1950 to 1999 or from 2000 till date. A list of such dramas from different times is listed below.

Niger Delta Dramas from 1950 to 1999

1. This is our chance (1956) - James Ene Henshaw
2. Medicine for love (1964) - James Ene Henshaw
3. The Raft (1964) - J.P clark
4. Ozidi (1996) - J.P clark
5. Song of a Goat (1961) - J.P clark
6. The Masquerade (1964) - J.P clark
7. The Bikoroa (1981) - J.P clark
8. Hangmen also Die (1989) - Esiaba Irobi
9. The Fortunes of the Rivers Family - J.P clark
10. Another Family - J.P clark
11. Ovonromwen Nogbaisa (1971) - Ola Rotimi
12. The trials of Oba Ononran wen (1988) - Ahmed Yerima
13. Little Drop - Ahmed Yerima
14. Dana on his Grave (2002) - Bardays .f. Ayakorna
15. The wives Revolt - J.P clark
16. The Remnant - Agoro savior Nathan
17. The scent of crude oil - Umukoro M.M
18. Harvest of Ghost (1999) - Sama Ukala
19. A matter of Honour (2010) - Barclays Ayakoroma
20. Nirokodi (1991) - Esiaba Irobi
21. The other side of the Mask (1999) - Esiaba Irobi
22. The Color of Rusting Gold (1989) - Esiaba Irobi
23. The Fronded Circle (1999) - Esiaba Irobi
24. King Jaja (1996) - Belgam Henry
25. Akassa Yomi - (1979) - Ola Rotimi

Niger Delta Dramas from 2000 till date

1. Dance of the Ghost (2010) - Benebai Benedict
2. Legend of Egbesu - Benebai Benedict
3. Disciples of the Agadagba - Benebai Benedict
4. Sounds of the Rising Sun - Benebai Benedict
5. Adakazi, the Warrior Goddess - Benebai Benedict
6. Errors of our Heros - Benebai Benedict
7. If not (a play of the gods) - Benebai Benedict
8. The seventh Virgin - Benebai Benedict

9. Coppers Verdict – Benebai Benedict
10. Beyond Nightmare – Benebai Benedict
11. Kerena’s Cross – Benebai Benedict
12. Hard Ground – Ahmed Yerima
13. A Tower of Babel – Broderick Esabmabeke Opuofemi
14. The Tender Warriors – Chika C. Onu
15. The Gardeners – Emaseadu
16. Iradi war- Sam Ukala
17. The other Side of the Mask – Esiabi Irobi
18. Storms of Karadu – Odire Fredrick Abel
19. A Marriage for Dream – Tom Buruaku
20. Silveoutle Cash Price – Tom Buruaku
21. Inikpi- Ekpe – Tom Buruaku
22. A Matter of Honour (2010) – Barclays Ayakoroma
23. Nana Olomu (2001) – Mathew .M. Umeikoro
24. Dance on his Grave (2002) – Barclays Ayakoroma
25. All for Oil (2000) – J.P clark
26. A Scar for Life – Barclays Ayakoroma
27. Agadagba Warriors – Adesi Akpos

Conclusion

This paper aimed at understanding the Niger Delta drama by looking at the history of the Niger Delta region. From the history of the Niger Delta, it was revealed that the sources or drivers of conflict in the region go as far back as the 19th century and the neglect from both government and the multinational oil companies birthed a series of activism (from non-violent to extreme violence) at different times. It is the series of activism brought about by the grievances of the Niger Delta people that writers, particularly the Niger Delta playwrights, record in their dramas. Also, from the listings of Niger Delta Dramas from the 1950s till date, it is worth noting that the experiences of the Niger Delta people and the development of events in Niger Delta region have been documented from the historic past. Hence, the question about whether the Niger Delta Drama has been in existence or if it is a new construct has been adequately dealt with in this work.

Again, the discussions in prior sections reveal that the writers referred to as the Niger Delta Playwrights or Dramatists, do not necessarily have to be indigenes from the Niger Delta. Rather, what connects these writers, from within and outside the region, is their ability to accurately put down the collective experiences of the Niger Delta people and the continued degradation (resulting from exploration and gas flaring activities) of their land in their artistic creations; such that their readers or audience (both national and international) can be enlightened on the plight of those in the said area. Thus, like Ken Saro Wiwa and Isaac Adaka Boro, these writers are partners in the call for a better Niger Delta.

Finally, this paper concludes by stating that a Niger Delta drama is that drama that candidly records and exposes the disheartening existential predicaments of the Niger Delta people and the methods the aggrieved youths in the region have adopted in the bid to fight against the oppressive powers that have become their succubus. Such artistic creations, as the plays listed above, satirize the abnormalities observed in the Niger Delta region, bringing the issues of concerns to the limelight and throwing them open to national and international discourse.

References

- Azaiki, S. (2003). *Inequities in Nigerian politics*. Yenagoa: Treasure Communications Resource limited.
- Abah, B. (2009). *When Blessing becomes a Curse in the Niger Delta*. *Environmental Rights Action*, N,d, Web. 10 February, 2020.
- Clark, J.P. (1991). *The Wives Revolt*. Ibadan: University Press Plc. Eni group, Naoc: *Social Commitment in the Niger delta*.
- Emenyonu, E. (1991). "Introduction" *African Literature and African Historical Experiences*. Ed. Chidi Ikonne, Emelia Oko and Peter Onwuadinjo, *Studies in African Literature*. Ibadan: Heinemann.
- Etiowo, J.M. (2014). "Forms of War in Nigeria Literature". *Cscanada: A Journal on Studies in Literature and Language*. Canada. Vol. 8, No. 1, p130-139.
- Irobi, E. (1989). *Hangmen Also Die*. Enugu: Abic Books, A Unique African Concept Publishers.
- National Population Census Figures (2006) Office of Statistic. Spencer, M. (2003). "What more needs saying about imagination?" *Journal of*
- Yerimah, A. (2006). *Hard Ground*. Ibadan: Kraftgriots.