

## THE ERADICATION OF TOXIC WASTES AND POLLUTANTS IN OGONI LAND: AN IGWEBUIKE APPROACH

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### **Abstract**

*Ogoni land, in Rivers State, Nigeria, is one of the areas mostly affected by modern technology associated with anthropogenic release of green house gases and chemical pollutants leading to environmental degradation with serious health, economic, and social implications to the people of the community. The loss of biodiversity to maintain a balance of the ecosystem by restoring soil nutrients, protecting water resources and stabilizing the climate has led to the extinction of marine life, killing the tourism industry which was a means of economic empowerment for the people. Land and water pollution especially through oil spillages have made it impossible for the people to have potable water. Fishing and farming is now a mirage and this has compounded the menace of unemployment and youth restiveness in the region, cumulating in low standard of living. This Paper, which adopts socio-phenomenological and descriptive methodologies, emphasises the necessity for an Igwebuiké approach in order to establish a lasting solution to the menace. The Igwebuiké philosophy is the Igbo traditional philosophy which extols the virtue of employing united efforts towards achieving goals. The application of the Igwebuiké perspective is imperative here because in order to change what is going on in any society or to help that society develop, it is expedient that the mindset of the individuals that make up that society is trained in a way that is geared towards self and societal improvement and development. The Igwebuiké approach is not foreign to the Ogoni people, judging by their socio-political and cultural milieu. A call for its application is only to facilitate a reawakening of this philosophy in the people's hearts so that their innate altruistic and united way of living (that is gradually eroding as a result of acculturation and adherence to global trends) can be used as an effective tool, positively exploited to solve myriads of problems beleaguering the people; especially in tackling the problem of toxic waste and pollutants in Ogoni land.*

**Keywords:** Igwebuiké, Ogoni, toxic waste, oil spillage, pollutants, ecosystem.

## Introduction

In the Niger-Delta, especially Ogoni Land, in Rivers State, Nigeria, modern technology has brought several challenges which inhibit the process of growth and development of the people. Anthropogenic release of green house gases and chemical pollutants like carbon-monoxide and other combustible elements, disposal of lubricating oils from machines into rivers, crude oil exploration and pipe-line vandalism, all lead to environmental degradation and contribute to global warming. These pollution-intractable problems affect communities and have serious health, economic, and social implications.

The focus of this work is to look at the solution to the problem in the light of employing the *Igwebuike approach*, and this calls for a definition of the term. *Igwebuike*, according to Kanu (2015), is an Igbo philosophical worldview that emphasises the importance of strength in communal living. *Igwebuike*, is actually a three-word sentence that is blended into a single word. The first word, "igwe," means "number" or "population"; "bu" means "is", while "ike" is the word signifying strength or power. "Igwebuike" could therefore be translated as, "Number is strength" or "number is power." The Igbo traditional philosophy teaches that when humans come together, in solidarity, and thus complementing one another in their united efforts towards achieving any goal, they become so powerful that they can constitute an invincible force, Kanu (2014). This clearly brings to mind the biblical story of the *Tower of Babel* exemplifying positive strength in achieving goals through the exhibition of unity of purpose (Genesis 11: 6). Here it was clearly stated that because the people were one, spoke one language and had one mind, it would be easy for them to achieve whatever they wanted to achieve.

The *Igwebuike* tradition expresses the notion that the African community is a closely knit society, beginning from the extended family unit, where there is the emphasis of a person being his brother's keep. From the family unit, it extends to the village, the clan, and the whole of the tribe. The idea is that a person cannot exist on his or her own without supporting or being supported by members of his/her kindred. The consciousness of this interdependence of one with the other makes individuals realise that their unique talents only make meaning as long as they are used for the benefit of others. This Igbo philosophy of life is entrenched in their social-cultural lives and reflected in their conduct, morality, folklores, myths, rites, norms, rules, ideas, cognitive mappings and theologies. Like the Ubuntu ideology (I am because we are) of the Zulus, the world of relationship,

harmony, continuity and complementarity makes seemingly impossible tasks easy to accomplish within their collective capability, Kenshin (2016).

The African's relational character is such that ensures that he/she does not suffer alienation. It is an anthropocentric ontology - a complete unity or solidarity which is difficult to break; an intricate web of the African philosophical experience. The individual's life depends on that person identifying with the group, making it imperative to show obligation to the members of the group; by thinking and acting in ways that promote corporate survival of the group. A person's sense of responsibility is therefore evaluated in terms of responsiveness and sensitivity to the needs and demands of the individuals that make up the group, Kanu (2017). Social order of African community as demonstrated in the traditional and socio-cultural structure and government of the Ogoni people and by extension Africa as a whole, is such that could be positively exploited to solve myriads of problems beleaguering the continent if only the people could lay aside negative foreign views that have infiltrated their minds through formal education and other cosmopolitan influences.

With the igwebuiké culture, there are indisputable rights and privileges enjoyed from the possessive nuance of belongingness, pointing to the fact that the meaningfulness of an individual's life is based on his or her relational connectivity with others. Kenshin (2016), Avers that the way people see reality affects their value system and attitudinal orientations. It is this positive inclination of seeing the oneness of family, tribe and by extension the nation that should be exploited for the transformation and humanisation of society especially in tackling the problem of toxic waste and pollutants in Ogoni Land.

### **Ogoni Land - Geography and Socio-Political Structure**

It is expedient that mention is made of where the Ogonis are situated and to also get a glimpse of their socio-political and cultural settings in order to get a clear understanding of how these could be brought to bear in harnessing the igwebuiké philosophy, as a tool for actualising the eradication of toxic wastes and pollutants in Ogoni Land.

The Ogoni people of Western Niger Delta region of southern Nigeria are a minority ethnic group that became part of the Rivers State of Nigeria in the 1970s. According to Oyinlade and Vincent, (2002), the Ogonis represent less than .05 percent of Nigeria's population of about 200.96 million people. Notwithstanding, it is one of the most densely populated regions in Nigeria, with

about 1,233 people per square mile. They are bounded by the Ibibio in the southeast, the Igbo to the north, the Ikwerres to the west, and the Adoni and Ijaw to the south. The Ogoni Nation is bounded on the North and East by the Imo River, on the South by the coastal sand plains occupied by the Adonis; on the west by the Aba-Port Harcourt highway. The region has coastal sand plains, deltaic and floodplains, mangrove forests, and barrier island habitats. It covers a range of about 404 square miles. The temperature is hot and humid. Prior to oil drilling the land was very fertile and was called the bread basket of the region. They engage in farming and fishing. As fishers, they work together in small groups to enlarge their cash and enhance their share in the fish market.

The Ogoni are organised into six traditional political kingdoms. These are the Khana; comprising four kingdoms (Babbe, Ken Khana, Nyo Khana and Tai), the Gokana, the Eleme. The six kingdoms are further divided into three separate but united sections. There are over 124 villages and towns in Ogoni Land, each headed by a chief. The Ogoni are mostly monogamous but their women are generally prolific in procreation. The family unit plays a vital role in socialising the children to be good tribes people and citizens of Nigeria. The Ogoni have a hierarchical system headed by the Gbenemene or King. Under him is the Mene Bua (high chief) who governs a group of villages or towns. Each village and town has a chief called Mene Buen. The villages have many compounds with each their own compound chiefs, the Mene Zeu, who reports directly to the Mene Buen. All chiefs revere the Gbenemene, the highest political office holder in the Land, and defer authority to him in matters dealing with the development of his kingdom, and the relationship between state government and the kingdom. The hardly challenge their leaders and would rather take instructions from the monarchy than from the officials of the state government.

### **Toxic Waste and Polutants in Ogoni Land**

The business of toxic waste is a gigantic and satanic activity that observers according to Onwunmere (2007) call an arm of the Devil's Trinity, including hard drugs and illegal arms deal. All over Africa, toxic wastes within the nations and those shipped in from developed nations constitute a threat to the health of the people. For instance, in February 14, 2017, Vanguard Newspaper reported that the "Garden City" of Port Harcourt started experiencing black soot falling from the sky that started in November, 2016, scaring and annoying residents of the oil hub because nothing was done to protect their health. People's clothes, bodies and floors were "tarred". Traders covered their wares with umbrellas; people wore protective masks, but could not escape accumulating dark phlegm in their

lungs and throats and black particles in their nostrils. Cars were also covered in dust. Hash tag #stopthesoot# was all over the social media. There were photographs of hands and feet covered in dust and protest marches were organised.

Air pollution is an emergency situation in Ogoni Land and other parts of the Niger Delta. Vanguard July 31 (2011) reports that Oil revenue is central to Nigeria's economy, accounting for about 70% of government earnings and 90% foreign exchange. Decades of exploration, spills, pollution of farmlands and fish in the maze of creeks across the Niger-Delta has greatly affected the health and social-economic status of people in the region. About 94% of Nigerians are exposed to air pollution implication levels that exceed World Health Organisation guidelines.

Burning tyres for scrap copper and illegal refineries were some of the speculated causes of the smog.

Again, under the guise of recycling waste, the Rivers State government fenced and prepped a refuge dumpsite which it later called Rivers State Semi-Sanitary Landfill. The toxic waste dump was at Obigbo, in Oyingbo Local Government Area along Port Harcourt-Aba Express Way and popularly dubbed "Amaechi dustbin" (Rotimi Amaechi was the governor at the time). The toxic dumpsite was next to peoples' homes, schools businesses and health centres. With the heavy stench emanating from the site, those who could not move out were forced to endure the man-made environmental disaster. There were no equipment for waste sorting, processing, and onward forwarding for recycling contrary to what the State Government had made the people believe. The poor folk who had the unfortunate luck of having the dump as an unwelcome neighbour suffered in silence for fear of retribution.

On April 9<sup>th</sup> 2010 a Maersk Line vessel, operated by American President Line, APL, a wholly owned subsidiary of a Singapore based Neptune Orient Lines, arrived at the Federal Ocean Terminal at Onne in Rivers State and discharged some toxic waste; it got to Lagos on the 11<sup>th</sup> loaded with 70 storage (lead) batteries classified as Basel Code A1180 and broken televisions. On a tip off it was arrested by members the Nigerian Ports Authority - NPA and the Nigerian Customs Service - NCS exposing this cruelty of people to their fellow humans. Onitsha, in May 2016 was said to have the world's worst levels of PM10 particles, microscopic particles in the air, measuring between 2.5 and ten thousand of a

millimetre or micrometres from smokes, dust, soot, vehicle exhaust and industries.

Gas flaring and oil spillage in most parts of the land are common occurrences. Till date clean potable water is a luxury in parts of Ogoni Land. The land has been so polluted that drilled boreholes do not yield water fit for drinking. One of the resultant effects of this is that water for drinking and cooking is imported (packaged in plastic bags) from neighbouring states at exorbitant prices as a result of the high cost of transportation added to the cost of water. The poor and vulnerable who cannot afford the luxury of such imported water are left to make do with what polluted natural water sources have to offer them with obvious negative health implications.

Moreover, many rural dwellers that rely on fishing and farming have been thrown out of businesses and the youth especially are rendered restive. As far back as 2011, John Vidal an environmental editor in Guardian News Papers noted the following about Ogoni Land and the Niger Delta:

- i. Community drinking water contains dangerous concentrations of benzene and other pollutants.
- ii. The soil contamination is more than five metres deep in many areas.
- iii. Most of the spill sites that oil firms claimed to have cleaned are still highly contaminated.
- iv. There is evidence of oil firms dumping contaminated soil in unlined pits.
- v. Water is coated with hydrocarbons more than 1,000 times the level allowed by Nigerian water standards.
- vi. There is failure by Shell and others to meet minimum Nigerian or own standards.

Farmland is also affected, destabilising the economic life and the health of the people and desecrating the ecosystem.

### **Impact of Environmental Degradation**

A lot of Nigerians, especially from the Ogoni Nation and the Niger Delta, according to Bob-Manuel (2017) suffer health problems that can be linked to the activities of oil extractors. It begins with running down the ecosystem by compromising the environment with all sorts of hazards ranging from extinction of species, air, water and land pollution, leading to respiratory diseases such as breathing difficulties, including pneumonia and asthma. The United Nations

Environment Programme (UNEP) estimates some 600,000 people die in Africa every year as a result of air pollution. Again, environmentalists have been sounding the alarm that the soot contains sulphur dioxide and nitrogen dioxide which cause acid rain when combined with moisture. It is common to see people with burning eyes, and sore throat, and with few and sometimes no health facilities in some places, the trauma the people experience is difficult to express. The loss of biodiversity to maintain a balance of the ecosystem by restoring soil nutrients, protecting water resources and stabilizing the climate has led to the extinction of marine life. All these have not just made the impact of global warming not only excruciating but has also killed the tourism industry which was a means of economic empowerment for the people of the Niger Delta Region.

Exposure of fish to heavy toxic metal, sediments in rain, and in drinking water, have been implicated in the high incidence of prostate enlargement among the residents of the Niger-Delta region Kadafa (2012). There is also the issue of unemployment for the locals whose major means of livelihood is fishing and farming. Land and water pollution have made it impossible for the people to fish and farm. There is also noise pollution as a result of the activities of oil and gas companies. The economic impact of the cost of cleaning up oil spillage and stopping flaring is high and many of the extracting companies are not ready to do the right thing probably because the government is not responsible enough to hold them accountable.

Lack of accessibility to basic education, underdevelopment and unemployment, have contributed a lot to youth restiveness leading to the formation of militant groups, prostitution, robbery and other vices. Thus, we have negative impact of pollution (due to the activities of the oil companies) ranging from destabilisation of the ecosystem, to health hazards, noise pollution, economic crippling through unemployment, and leading to poverty that is intensified by lack of provision of infrastructure. The cumulative result of all this is low standard of living.

### **Employing the Igwebuiké Approach as a Tool for Eradging Toxic Wastes and Poluutants in Ogoni Land**

A great hue and cry has gone up; that the ruination of the eco-system is a process to which people have to put an urgent stop. Nonetheless, no matter how high the decibel and persistence of the public clamour, without the people taking decisive steps to end this menace, it will all be an effort in futility. Applying the igwebuiké approach should be a sure-fire way to ensure a safe earth for all to

dwel in. This is because many voices that have spoken on the topic have proposed solutions with buck-passing implications. There is the pressing need to sensitise all and sundry of that fight for a clean and sustainable environment is everyone's duty. It requires a collaborative effort, which is what igwebuike is all about.

Fortunately, the Ogoni Nation has a socio-cultural and political structure with an ethnocentric mental image that is anthropocentric and supportive of this necessity for a combined effort. All hands ought to be on deck, from the family unit, to the Mene Zeu (compound heads), the Mene Buen (village/town heads), to the Mene Bua (high chiefs and governor of villages/towns) to the Gbenemene or King to ensure that meaningful results are achieved in the eradication of toxic wastes and pollutants. All nations begin with individuals. Therefore, viewing this from what the individuals can do, the following areas should be looked into.

The first thing to do is that right from the family unit parents should sensitise their children and extended family members and through their exemplary demonstrations of the need for keeping the surroundings clean. The people should heed Onwumere (2007)'s cry, reiterating that people put a stop to habits such as, poor waste management, leading to contamination of fresh water sources. Individuals and groups should avoid dumping refuse in drainages and natural waste channels, leading to destruction of aquatic life, and harmful to flora and fauna, which are the mainstays of most rural folk.

Again families should opt for safer cooking methods order than the use of faggots in order to stem the tide deforestation and smoking and smouldering the ecological space. Instead, steady efforts should be made (from the Mene Zeu to the Gbenemene) towards reforestation and forestation. Toxic smoke from burning of tyres and rubbish including bush burning for agricultural and hunting purposes should be refrained from.

The Gbenemene and other leaders under him should educate and strategise through persuasive therapy, to educate members of Pressure Groups that in their bid to get across to the government and the various multi-national companies who help to degrade the environment, they themselves should not end up adding to the destruction in the ecosystem through vandalising oil pipe lines, thus making life more unbearable for the indigenous poor people who get their livelihood from the rivers and land.

The government of the nation ought to show that they care and also understand the implications of the attack on the environment. This should reflect by their being sensitive to the fact that environmental revitalisation, restoration and accretion are important issues that should attract the installation of think tanks for effective strategic public planning and policy implementation.

The government both at the state and federal levels should see to it that technical advancement accelerating decline in the quality of the environment and ability to sustain life, is moderated for a more eco-friendly system. Apart from control of industrial wastes, poultry, and other industries that cause air, water and noise pollution should be situated in places far from residential quarters. Adequate storm drains should be provided to avoid flooding and erosion that deplete the rich soil deposits and add to the people's poverty.

The West should not wrongfully think that since most developing nations seem to care very little about their environment, they could just use them as dump sites. This is a wrong notion that is borne out of human depravity, leading to the strong over-powering nations oppressing the weak. Instead they should bear in mind that destruction of the environment in any part of the world will also with time affect other regions. They should therefore play supportive roles in ensuring that the waste is well managed and the negative effects of toxins are ameliorated. Again, state and federal governments that there is civil right enforcement protection. These should not be dead letters written for the mere fun of it, and the rules should be frequently amended to suit modern realities.

A legacy of absence of adequate municipal waste evacuation services, leading to the production of toxic smoke from burning of rubbish, should be a thing of the past if people could be well educated about better ways of refuse disposal and governing being able to provide healthy waste disposal services. Ash soot and smog could be reduced by giving licence to illegal refineries to function while monitoring them to ensure that they do not indiscriminately burn tyres for scrap copper or use petrol containing high levels of sulphur.

The shameful condition of the near non-existent power supply need to be addressed, so that the use of generators that has become inevitable, and adding to the toxic fumes and noise pollution can be a thing of the past. The present and in-coming administrations should not be indifferent to the implementation of policies that safeguard and protect the environment. They should not allow the hope for person gains from the multinational companies blind their eyes and

minds to the fact that both the leaders and the led live in this environment and whatever negative practices that are allowed will invariably affect us all.

The church has a role to play especially in the creation of awareness that land is not a commodity belonging to us but that we should see land as a community to which we belong. As Bauckham (2010), rightly points out, human life as not a self-contained affair, but takes place in relationship both to the creator and to the rest of the creation. Thus, the intricate interdependence of soil, water, flora and fauna, in which humans also belong will help to emphasise that humans have obligation not just to one another but to the land (land here, meaning, the soil, water bodies, air etc). God reminds us in Leviticus 25:23-24 that the land belongs to Him and that we as tenants must provide for the redemption of the land. The Church's understanding of these issues is imperative because as Alokwu (2009) points out, the church has environmental responsibility that it needs to live up to in practical ways.

For her voice to be effective, the church should devise strategies to ensure that the mentality of our leaders change so that they can state and implement strict penalties for toxic dumpers and ensure that oil companies operate in ways in which care for the environment and the people are given due priority. Gleaning from Oviasuyi, P. O. and Uwadiae J. (2010) and Ajodo-Adebanjoko, A. (2017) certain suggestions come to mind. The church could work with communities to take part in the process of discussing their problems and suggesting possible solutions. The church needs to involve people of the grassroots that feel the pinch the most. Village councils, family heads, non militants and militants, activists, community leaders, elders, religious leaders, youth leaders should be engaged by the church and the government in collaboration with the multinational companies, in interactive study workshops, designed to suggest possible solutions and strategies for implementation.

Phenomena such as vector-borne diseases, flooding and landslides, ozone depletion, gully erosions, climate-induced migrations, desertification and all forms of violence to the environment through industrialisation and wars should be a primary concern for Christians because God created the world; it belongs to Him and he has delivered it to us. Thus, we have the responsibility to maintain it and give a good stewardship of it. Moreover, our humanity and wellbeing depends on the environment. This according to Dreibelbis (2005), makes it imperative that people are alerted of the importance of working for and with God in the process of repairing creation. Indeed churches have been eco-justice

advocates based on the conviction of the integrity of creation, responsibility to steward God's creation and conviction that justice, peace, and environmental protection are linked.

As part of the creation of awareness of the impact of environmental degradation, Christian communities could observe the celebration of environmental days which are usually at national and internal levels. This will create in the people the need to be agents of change. Moreover, seminars and retreats that focus on environmental stewardship could be used to redefine the people's understanding about the relationship of humans and nature. Even liturgical songs that are of environmental concern could help to communicate messages oriented towards environmental protection. Through the use of both print and electronic media, the church can preach its position and advocate for environmental care and sustainability.

Institutions of government and development intervention agencies should fast track process of environmental remediation and ecosystem restoration. Transparency and accountability should be taken seriously. Health risk communication process can be improved as a means of advancing understanding, practice and policy. Legislation, decrees and enactments that are disempowering should be reviewed and where necessary abrogated as they continue to serve as impediments to peace and security.

Topics like the use of environmentally sound technology, proper method of farming, bush burning control and the use of chemicals as detrimental to the soil fertility, avoidance of the use of harmful chemicals for fishing, proper waste disposal, and recycling of waste material are very essential. The church could establish funds from which scholarships could be awarded to relevant students to pursue courses on environmental management, environmental theology and agriculture. The church could also provide financial support or partner with environmental agencies and departments to ensure environmental sustainability; give voice to the socially excluded through involvement of Community Based Associations, so that representatives from the ordinary people can participate in the process of planning, implementation, monitoring and executing of projects. Transnational oil companies should reserve a percentage of job openings for qualified and employable youths in the host communities.

The church should prompt the government to ensure that transnational oil companies modernise infrastructure and equipment and replace aging and

corroding pipes as a preventive measure against frequent oil spillage and to ensure implementation of memoranda of understanding that are signed with host communities. In addition, there should be construction of roads and other amenities provided by the multinational companies.

Pastoral letters that promote eco-justice should be translated into local languages and discussed in small Christian communities. People should be informed, and education is key to reorient them. Theological schools, seminaries and academics could also teach stewardship of all creation in order to deepen the ethical and theological understanding of the causes of global warming. By this future ministers will become aware of the reality of the ecological crisis and how to respond to it.

Apart from the church's contribution in health and education, each Christian must consider the implication of an ecological theory for their life and the application of ecological concepts is possible in diverse fields of employment and personal interests. The church could help to demand cessation of the production of all toxin, hazardous waste and radioactive material, protection from nuclear testing, extraction, production and disposal of toxic/hazardous wastes that threaten the fundamental right to clean air, land, water and food.

The United Nations and African leaders should help Africa by enacting strict laws that would prevent these waste merchants from shipping these unwanted wastes into Africa. All over Africa, pollutants like toxic ash smog, toxic wastes within the nations and those shipped in from developed nations, oil spills, and pipeline vandalism, asphalt processing plants belching out thick smoke from its operations are common features that should be stopped.

Development priorities should be set by local priorities, to clean up and rebuild our cities and rural areas in balance with nature. All past and current producers should be held strictly accountable to the people for detoxification and the containment at the point of production. Collaborators should be dealt with; if there are no collaborators there will be no perpetrators. Emergency measures should be taken to clean up drinking wells, and companies working in the Niger Delta should overhaul the way they operate.

### **Conclusion**

The application of the igwebuiké perspective is imperative here because in order change what is going on in any society or to help that society develop, it is

expedient that the mindset of the individuals that make up that society is changed or trained in a way that is geared towards self and societal improvement and development. Nothing can be achieved with a mindset that negates whatever desirable ideologies that are put forward for attainment (no matter the capital and materials made available), if the recipients of such ideas are not wired to and as such helpless rebuff them in practical term.

The igwebuiké approach is not foreign to the African, let alone the Ogoni national milieu. However, a reawakening of this philosophy in the hearts and interaction of the people is necessary at this time because most of our African ideologies of oneness, and corporate existence – the kind of communal living that calls for altruism that sometimes necessitates putting the kindred and community’s survival above one’s interest, have been bastardised by global trends that are suggestive of “every man for himself and God for us all,” Oguejior, (2010). The Ogoni Nation, Nigerians and Africans in general need to heed the clarion call to go back to those values that unite us and had easily helped us to achieve our goals as a nation. One of such values is to see goal achievement as a team work that needs the individual and group’s contribution, realising that if we must achieve anything positive, especially this cry for eco-safety and sustenance, the buck stops at our feet. This is what igwebuiké entails. If the afore-stated suggestions are implemented, harmful practices contributing to regional and global climate imbalances, leading to excessive storage of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere and contributing to global warming can be checked and we will live in a better and healthier world.

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