

# Unpacking Narratives of Nigeria: Niger Delta and the Other Story in Adesi's *Agadagba Warriors* and Yerima's *Hard Ground*

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## Abstract

The Niger Delta region contributes the highest quota to the Nigerian economy in terms of crude oil production following the discovery of oil in Oloibiri, Bayelsa State of Nigeria in 1956. However, despite the historical and economic significance of heritage sites like Oloibiri and others, the Niger Delta has been ravaged by poverty, and its farmlands and water bodies polluted because of oil spillage. While popular narrative promotes Nigeria as Africa's biggest economy and oil hub, as a heritage site, the Niger Delta region has not attracted national and international recognition. This study juxtaposes the Niger Delta narrative with the Nigerian narrative using Akpos Adesi's *Agadagba Warriors* and Ahmed Yerima's *Hard Ground* in order to present a more-complete narrative about Nigeria. This qualitative research adopts Homer-Dixon's (1999) "Theory of Eco-violence" as its theoretical framework. It observed that the Niger Delta narrative has not changed and recommends that the Nigerian government does the needful by giving the needed attention to the Niger Delta and preserving heritage sites like Oloibiri in Bayelsa State of Nigeria.

**Keywords:** Narratives, Niger Delta, Cultural Heritage, Marginalization, Nigeria.

## Introduction

The Niger Delta region which is located in the south-south zone of Nigeria contributes the highest quota to the Nigerian economy in terms of crude oil production following the discovery of oil in Oloibiri, Bayelsa State of Nigeria in 1956 and other parts of the region such as Ogoni, in Rivers State. However, despite the historical and economic significance of heritage sites like Oloibiri, Ogoni, and others, the Niger Delta region is yet to see the dividends of the oil it contributes to the Nigerian economy. The people of the Niger Delta have been devastated by poverty, and their farmlands and water bodies ravaged by oil spillage. According to Davis

(2010), hydrocarbon resources have been the engines for Nigeria's economy as oil provides 95% of Nigeria's foreign exchange earnings and 80% of the government's budgetary revenues (pp. 1-2). This has led the Niger Deltans to demand compensation as well as control of the oil wealth, and escalated to armed confrontation between Niger Delta activists and multinational oil companies operating in the region as well as the federal government (as cited in Ajodo-Adebanjoko, 2017).

The Niger Delta comprises of Abia, Akwa-Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo, Imo, Ondo and Rivers states, and is rich with diverse ecological zones, five of which are the Mangrove Forest and Coastal Vegetation Zone, the Fresh Water Swamp Forest Zone, the Lowland Rain Forest Zone, the Derived Savannah Zone and the Montane Zone. The Niger Delta is also the location of massive oil deposits which have been extracted for decades by the government of Nigeria and multinational oil companies (Ajodo-Adebanjoko & Ojua, 2013, p.2).

The revenue-sharing formula of Nigeria which gives the federal government 52.68%, 26.72% for state governments and 20.60% for local governments, while 13% derivation revenue goes to oil producing states, has not fostered economic development in the Niger Delta and elites of the region have called for a reversal of this sharing formula, arguing that more allocation be given to the region.

As a heritage site, the region has not attracted national and international recognition. The popular narrative locates the region as the birthplace of oil in Nigeria and promotes Nigeria as Africa's biggest economy and oil hub, but in reality, the region is yet to see the dividends of the revenue generated from the sales of her crude oil 65 years after the first oil well was discovered in the region. The federal government had promised to build a museum in Oloibiri to highlight the cultural and historical significance of this heritage site but that promise is yet to be fulfilled. This study seeks to pitch the Niger Delta narrative by juxtaposing it with the popular narrative of Nigeria using Akpos Adesi's *Agadagba Warriors* and Ahmed Yerima's *Hard Ground*. This qualitative research employs the case study and content analysis research approaches to realize set objectives.

## **Theoretical Framework**

This study adopts Homer-Dixon's (1999) "Theory of Eco-violence" as its theoretical framework.

The theory argues that:

Decrease in the quality and quantity of renewable resources act singly or in various combinations to increase the scarcity, for certain population groups, of vegetation, farmland, water, forests etc. This scarcity of ecological resources can reduce economic productivity, both for the local groups experiencing the scarcity and for the larger regional and national economies. Consequently, the affected people may migrate or be expelled to new lands ... while decreases in wealth can cause deprivation conflicts (Homer-Dixon, 1999, p.30).

The theory suggests that a declining availability of natural resources will lead to competition over available resources and result in conflict. Similarly Klare (2001) opines that competition over the control of valuable oil supplies and pipeline routes has emerged as a particularly acute source of conflict in the 21st century.

### **Cultural Heritage: Meaning**

Cultural heritage describes the ways of living developed by a group of people in a geographical location and passed on from generation to generation, including customs, practices, places, objects, artistic expressions and values. Cultural heritage is often expressed as either intangible or tangible cultural heritage (ICOMOS, 2002).

Cultural heritage also refers to a society's use of its past. Timothy and Boyd (2003) observe that cultural heritage contributes to the shaping of national stereotypes and regional identity and it is a modern or postmodern reflection of the past. In Europe, it is often associated with older city centers. In North America, it is strongly linked to national parks, museums and galleries in urban

areas. In Australia and New Zealand, it is associated with the indigenous culture, identity and landscape.

### **Minority, Cultural Diversity and the Niger Delta**

Multi-ethnic nations like Nigeria are often challenged with maintaining a monocultural national image at the expense of minority rights. According to Gbilekaa (2002), the quest for national unity has been an issue of serious concern in Nigeria, and even after independence on 1 October 1960, the name 'Nigeria' has remained a mere geographical expression (p. 216). Gbilekaa argues that politically speaking, there are three Nigerians (the Northern Nigerian, the Eastern Nigerian and the Western Nigerian) based on the three major ethnic groups of Hausa–Fulani, Igbo and Yoruba (2002, p. 216), aside other minority ethnic groups of Ijaw, Tiv, Ibibio, Edo, Efik, Ogoni and Urhobo that make up the country.

In the same vein, while trying to integrate and seeking to preserve their own identity, minorities are often faced with acts of intolerance and discrimination from the societies they are part of, which result in armed conflicts as is the case with the Niger Delta and the federal government of Nigeria.

### **Synopsis of Ahmed Yerima's *Hard Ground***

*Hard Ground* is a play about Nimi; an eighteen-year old boy who drops out of school and joins a militant group to fight for the freedom of his people. Nimi loses eighteen of his colleagues in a raid by the police and is blamed for their deaths. The Don, the leader of the group places a death sentence on him because of this. Things deteriorate when the Don orders the killing of Nimi's pregnant girlfriend Pikibo. Nimi decides to avenge their deaths and kills the Don only to discover that the Don is his father.

### **Synopsis of Akpos Adesi's *Agadagba Warriors***

Set in Okpetu land, the play begins with a confrontation and eventual conflict between Okpetu and his soldiers representing the Nigerian government and army, and Pulukeme and his boys

representing the Niger Delta militia, over the unfair sharing formula of the revenue generated from crude oil. The conflict ends when Okpetu reverses the unfair sharing formula in favour of the Niger Deltans.

### **Narratives of Nigeria and the Marginalization of the Niger Delta in *Agadagba Warriors* and *Hard Ground***

The Niger Delta region has witnessed a lot of conflicts in their fight for better representation and identity in Nigeria. Secessionist tendencies due to the feeling of marginalization on the part of the Niger Deltans and the use of force by Nigeria's government to maintain the nation's unity have remained the status quo and dominated the Niger Delta narrative. This is seen in *Agadagba Warriors* when Okpetu and his men, representing the Nigerian government, march onto the stage singing:

... We are saying Nigeria must be one  
We are fighting to save our land  
To keep Nigeria one  
(Adesi, 2008, p. 10).

The Niger Deltans express displeasure over the state of things in the region and the nonchalant attitude of the Nigerian government. This is captured in the words of Pulukeme who laments, "For how long shall I drink from the reek of oil polluted creeks which wreck havoc of untold dangers to my system?" (Adesi, 2008, p.16). He and his boys demand that the unfair revenue-sharing formula be reversed else they would continue to fight the government. They argue that Nigeria's centralized federal system is responsible for their marginalization and agitate for a restructured federal Nigeria; an agitation propelled by the desire for ownership of the Niger Delta oil wells and the autonomy to control oil production activities in the region.

Similarly, in *Hard Ground*, Nimi embraces militancy as a means of fighting for the emancipation of the Niger Deltans. He speaks of how they destroy oil facilities and attack oil company workers in the region, “I was a little man in trenches, planning the attacks of blocking the oil wells in trenches, finding how to kidnap the white men, exploiters of our nation state” (2005, p.37). However, the playwright questions the legitimacy of this fight as some Niger Delta rulers like Nimi’s uncle Inyingifaa, benefit from the conflict because of their arms trade. Inyingifaa threatens to kill Nimi because his business stopped due to the deaths of his boys in the camp. Nimi’s mother, Mama calls him a traitor, in her words: “That one is a traitor. He will sell his own blood if the price is good. He measures everything in terms of money...” (Yerima, 2005, p. 31). *Hard Ground* also exposes the consequences of the Niger Delta conflict on the family and the Nigerian society by extension. Nimi loses his pregnant girlfriend Pikibo, colleagues and his father because of the Niger Delta conflict; the same way many Niger Deltans are losing their lives due to the conflict.

In *Agadagba Warriors*, the conflict resolves when Okpetu reverses the sharing formula of the proceeds from the blackgold (crude oil), leaving the Niger Deltans with 87 bags of the general proceeds, while the federal government will keep the remaining 13 bags, and where Pulukeme and his people are prudent in the management of the 87 bags, they shall let them have the complete 100 bags. In return, the Niger Deltans would pay tax to the federal government on the produce from the black gold. However, this is not the case in reality as the Nigerian government is yet to reverse the unfair revenue-sharing formula.

## **Conclusion**

The structural inequalities and unequal power relationships that exist between the Global North and the Global South also find expression in the way minority groups like the Niger Delta of Nigeria, have been marginalized and heritage sites like Oloibiri in the Niger Delta, have been used by the Nigerian government to further and legitimize its economic interests, and maintain

its international image and dominance as the largest producer of oil in Africa, while the Niger Delta remains neglected.

This study observed that in spite of efforts by the Niger Deltans to attract the necessary attention, the Nigerian government is yet to address the plights of the Niger Deltans. It recommends that the Nigerian government does the needful by giving the needed attention to the Niger Delta and preserving heritage sites like Oloibiri in Bayelsa State of Nigeria and elsewhere in the country.

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