

# **The Consequences of Ethnic Conflicts and Disunity on the Civic Education of Youths in the Niger Delta**

**By  
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## **Abstract**

*The Niger Delta, like many other parts of Nigeria, has become a region of almost unending conflicts in recent times. These conflicts which are mainly caused by bad government policies and the exploitative activities of the various multi-national oil companies operating in the area, have introduced bad blood (hatred) and disunity between communities and peoples in the region. This paper examines the consequences of these conflicts and disunity on the civic education of the youths in the area. The paper contends that the conflicts and the hatred and disunity caused by them have made many of the youths in the area misfits as they are the ones that do the physical fighting. The paper also recommends some measures – the proper orientation of the youths through lectures, symposia and seminars; creation of employment opportunities to keep them occupied; and the teaching of history at levels of education to show them the connections between them and others – that could end the conflicts and disunity in the region. When the conflict and disunity cease, the youths can then be properly educated to become good citizens.*

**Keywords:** Consequences, ethnic conflicts, disunity, Niger Delta, education of youths

## **1.0. Introduction**

The Niger Delta has become a region of strife and violence in recent times. The area which had enjoyed relative peace since the end of the Nigerian civil war in 1970 has, from the last decade of the twentieth century, become a region of almost constant misunderstandings and conflicts. Many of the

people in the area see themselves as being exploited and marginalised by government and the various multi-national oil companies operating there. The general feeling among the people is that while the wealth which had been used to develop all other nooks and corners of the country is derived from their land, nothing worthwhile has been done for them (Okoko and Ibaba, 1998; Nicholas, 2002)

Frustrated by their poor conditions of living, some of the peoples and communities in the area have mobilised forces against government and the various oil companies, which they see as collaborators in their exploitation and marginalisation. These protests which initially took the form of work stoppages, vandalism of petroleum pipelines and other oil installations later expanded to include the kidnapping of company workers; particularly expatriate workers, illegal bunkering, and the rough-handling and even killing of state security operatives (Ibaba, 2002; Aaron, 2003; Duruji and Azuh, 2015).

In some other cases, however, the hostilities have been between different Niger Delta groups and communities. Such communal and ethnic conflicts have occurred between the Okrika and Eleme, Nembe and Kalabari in the Eastern Niger Delta; between the Ijo and Urhobo, Ijo and Itsekiri, Urhobo and Itsekiri in the present Delta State, just to mention some of

the well known cases. In all these conflicts between various groups and communities in the Niger Delta region, the youths have been used as the foot soldiers. They are the ones that take up the arms to fight. As a result, they are the ones that are branded as “miscreants”, “militants”, and “terrorists” – labels that portray them as misfits and bad citizens of the country. But a closer look at issues reveals that these youths are not actually the people responsible for the conflicts. They only played out, in most cases, the scripts written for them by the elders and elites of the various groups in conflict. These are the people who should have guided them onto the path of righteousness; the people who should have tutored them on the virtues of tolerance, forgiveness and co-operation. Instead of playing this noble role, they preach to them the gospel of hatred, ethnic differences and disunity.

## **2.0. Ethnic Relations in the Past**

Until quite recently, most of the peoples of the Niger Delta were either fishermen or farmers. Some of them were canoe carvers/makers, while others engaged in weaving, salt making, pottery, palmwine tapping and gin distillation. At that time, young men and women learnt the occupations of their parents by simply following them to fish, farm etc.

On the moral plain, children learned the dos and don'ts of their people and communities through the guidance of their parents/guardians and other adult members of their families and communities. In those good old days, a child could be admonished and even punished for wrong doing by adults other than his/her parents/guardians. The parents/guardians may hear about what has happened and even further punish the child for the same offence. They would thank the neighbour(s) who called their child to order, without seeing or reporting to them. In fact, everybody was his brother's keeper. (Orugbani, 2005).

Some of the occupations of the people usually took them to other territories. For instance, during the months of September and October (about the beginning of the dry season), Ijo families in the Western Niger Delta would migrate to Itsekiri coastal settlements such as Jakpa, Ogidigben, Ogheye, Orere and Ugborodo to fish. While some of these families returned home after some months, others stayed for years before returning home (Erezene, 2008b). At night, because of the heavy presence of mosquitoes and sandflies, some of the *boys* of the Ijo fishermen would move out of the camp buildings and spread mats on the open seashore to sleep. There, in the open, Itsekiri young men and women would visit and play with them. In the process, they taught each other how

to speak their respective languages. Relations were, in a nutshell, very friendly and cordial.

Itsekiri families also migrated to Ijo territories for fishing and other businesses. Even before the 1880s when the British started to colonise the Ijo territories along the Forcados River, some Itsekiri were already living among the Iduwini of Oburutu (Oborotu). These Itsekiri were well treated and they prospered without hindrance. Relations between them and their Iduwini-Ijo hosts were so cordial that they were allowed to observe their own traditional masquerade and other festivals without molestation (Erezene, 2008b).

There were other Niger Delta groups that also migrated to Ijo territories for fishing and other commercial activities. The Isoko and Urhobo who were renowned palm-nut collectors and palm-oil producers, for example, went there to exploit the numerous oil palms which grew uncultivated. Some of them also killed mud fishes from the fresh water ponds produced by the heavy rains characteristic of the coastal areas occupied by the Ijo.

Another prominent group (though not strictly of the Niger Delta) that was found in many Ijo territories were the Ilaje (Yoruba) of the present Ondo State of Nigeria. These people, like the Ijo, are a predominantly fishing folk. They were the people that were referred to as the “Mahins” in some

early European records. They established permanent fishing ports (camps) in many Ijo communities such as Agge, Amatu, Bilabiri, Odimodi, Ogbeintu, Orobiri, and Odioma, just to mention a few. In addition to fishing, Ijo women also produced salt from sea water and the aerial roots of the mangrove trees. This the Itsekiri and other groups bought from them. Although Ikime (1977) has stated that the Itsekiri also made salt, the Ijo were, no doubt, more prominent in this occupation. The Ijo in turn, bought the clay pots, which their women used in grinding tobacco, cooking and the production of salt from the Itsekiri (Alagoa, 2005). Some of the Ijo (such as the Eghema of Opuama and Polobubo in the present Warri North Local Government Area of Delta State), who were experts in carving or making canoes, paddles, and the weaving of baskets and other fish-storing equipments also sold these items to the Itsekiri and other Niger Delta/riverine groups (Erezene, 2008b, 2016).

In those early days, as we have clearly shown, strangers and tenants were not maltreated by their hosts/landlords. If a landlord maltreated his tenant, he (tenant) could sue him and obtain justice, no matter where he came from. Any missing item that was found was kept safely until the owner came for it. Nobody cared about who the owner

was. It was a near perfect society, based on love, justice and fair play. In fact, strangers were shown love everywhere.

### **3.0. Genesis of the Hostile Relations in the Niger Delta**

The beginning of hostile relations in the Niger Delta could be traced to the advent of the Europeans and their subsequent colonisation of the area in the 19th century. For administrative convenience, the British (who colonised Nigeria) brought some of the different ethnic groups such as the Ijo, Isoko, Itsekiri, Urhobo and Ukwuani together without regard for their traditional boundaries, and ethnic and cultural differences. They, at the same time, used *divide and rule* tactics to keep them disunited for easy exploitation.

There is no reliable evidence, for instance, that people paid rents in the Niger Delta for the use of land before the advent of the Europeans. From all indications, the payment of rents is a fairly recent development in the Niger Delta region. Farmers and fishermen who farmed/fished on land or in creeks owned by others normally gave part of the harvest/catch to the owners in appreciation for allowing them to farm/fish in such places (Erezene, 2008b, 2016). Ikime (1977) has stated in his discussion of Urhobo/Itsekiri relations that the payment of annual rents for land probably followed the *Public Lands Acquisition Proclamation* of 1903. This colonial legislation

put a new value on land as European merchants and colonial officers started to acquire parcels of land under it to build factories and consulate offices. From this period, the issue of who owned any given piece of land, and should, therefore, be dealt with in that capacity, started among the various groups in the Niger Delta. The situation worsened when crude oil was discovered in the area by the second half of the 20th century. As the people became aware that “the oil produced or reserves a community can claim under its land will influence how much assistance it gets from government and oil companies” (SPDC, 1996, p.2), individuals, communities and even entire ethnic groups started to manipulate historical facts to suit themselves. In fact, since the discovery of crude oil in the Niger Delta, violent intra and inter-communal/group clashes have increased. These violent conflicts had involved the Urhobo, Itsekiri, Ijo, Ogoni, Andoni and Afam peoples of the Niger Delta (SPDC, 1996). For example, since the establishment of the Forcados Terminal at Ogulagha by Shell in 1968 (officially commissioned in 1971), there has been almost no enduring peace between the Ogulagha people and the Iduwini of Odimodi (Erezene, 2008a). The disputes between the two communities, over the piece of land on which the Shell tank farm is situated, erupted into violence in 2001, claiming many

lives and property on both sides. These are two Ijo communities that had lived peacefully together for centuries.

#### **4.0. Consequences of Ethnic Conflicts and Disunity on Civic Education of Youths in the Niger Delta**

It is a well-known fact that the character (pattern of life) of any individual anywhere is influenced to a very reasonable extent, by his environment. In clear terms, a person's character or behaviour has a lot to do with what he sees, hears and experience in his environment. Usually, a young person is made to understand the common attitudes, beliefs, and values of his people by the older people he grows up with. This process of training the young individual to imbibe the ways of life of his people which sociologists call socialisation (Musgrave, 1979), is basically aimed at making the young individual conform to pattern. It is an induction/character-moulding process meant to ultimately make the individual a useful citizen or member of his society (Erezene, 1999, 2011). DuBey, Edem and Thakur (1984, p. 3) have plainly referred to it as "the process by which individuals become members of a society."

The process of socialisation which is inextricably tied to the general process of education does not take place in a vacuum. It starts from the home, where the parents and other

relations help the young individual, directly and indirectly, to understand the dos and don'ts of his society; to the church/mosque/shrine, and the school. These agencies find collaborators in the playmates of the child, the mass media and the government (constituted authority) of the society (Erezene, 1999, 2011).

A very clear fact is that all the agencies listed above are in one way or the other operated by human beings or connected with human beings. In other words, whether we talk of the home, church/mosque/shrine, school, the peer-group, the mass-media or government, the upbringing of the young person is influenced by mates and older persons in his environment. If this environment is peaceful, the young person grows up to be peace-loving and accommodative. If, on the other hand, the environment is hostile; full of hatred, strife and rancour, as is presently the case in the Niger Delta, the young individual grows up to be hostile, hardened, and callous (Erezene, 2017). A youngman/woman who imbibes these negative attributes becomes a bad citizen or *misfit* in society. This is what has happened to many of the youths of the Niger Delta region of Nigeria in recent times, as in many other parts of the country. The hostile environment characterised by continuous conflicts and disunity, has made monsters of many Niger Delta youths! They have thrown decency to the wind,

and have come to believe in violence as the quickest way of getting what they want in life. The traditional values of honesty, kindness and hospitality for which many of the peoples of the Niger Delta region were known in the past, mean nothing to them. And because of their belief in violence, many of them have embraced cultism to obtain power and security.

### **5.0. Conclusion**

It is clear from our expositions in this paper that the hostile human environment in the Niger Delta (characterised by conflicts and disunity) has impacted negatively on the civic or citizenship education of the youths of the region. The violent behaviour and other vices indulged in by the youths of the area should however be blamed on the elders and elites of the region. They are the people who have fanned the embers of crises and disunity in the area for various reasons. They are the people who have incited the youths to fight. Ofogbor(2004) has described them as the “warlords.” As the youths continue to carry arms, kill and maim one another, they become inhuman and hardened. Interestingly, some of the so-called elders and elites who incite the youths to fight against their counterparts from other communities and ethnic groups, surface in local government headquarters, state capitals, and in

Abuja as “mediators” of peace. Even more painful is the fact that some of these elders and elites have safely sent their own children abroad to study. Government and well-meaning individuals therefore have a lot to do if the youths (leaders of tomorrow) are to be redeemed. They need to be given proper orientation through lectures, symposia and seminars, to see the havoc caused by their activities in the region. They need to be made to understand that their activities drive investors from the region and make it more and more underdeveloped. Government and well-to-do individuals in the region should also try to create employment opportunities for the youths to keep them engaged. Many of them are deceived to fight because they are idle. The history and problems of the region should also be properly taught at all levels of education to make the youths understand that many of the communities and peoples of the region have historical links and suffer similar problems, and therefore, need not fight one another.

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