

OIL PRODUCTION AND CHANGING CULTURAL PATTERN IN IKWERRE ETHNIC NATION: A CASE OF OBIO-AKPOR

Dr. Nsirim-Worlu Heoma(Mrs.)

Department of Sociology
University of Port Harcourt
NIGERIA
worlu@yahoo.com
www.uniport@edu.ng

ABSTRACT

Since oil was discovered in 1956 in commercial quantity in Oloibiri a town 90 kilometers west of Port Harcourt, the capital of Rivers State, life has not been the same with the people of the area. The importance attached on oil production varies from society to society, depending on whether a society is a consumer or producer nation. This study systematically structures the area in order to get a representative sample on how the oil production activity has impacted the area. Theoretically, dialectical materialism is employed since it will enable us to understand how the contradiction observed in the productive pattern of the people and the multinational oil production corporations (MNOPCs) located in the area brings about change in the culture of the people. Records show that oil production is the major economic base of Nigeria and it accounts for over eighty percent of total revenue; over ninety percent of export earnings of the federation and eighty-eight percent of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP). This work shows how oil production activities by the MNOPCs in the area contribute to the perceived changing cultural pattern of the people, for it is true that the production style of a people is a window to the people's way of life.

Keywords: oil production, dialectical materialism, MNOPCs, GDP

INTRODUCTION

Oil production has become a topical issue globally and several reasons account for this. On a first note, every society views oil and its production from the stand point of whether the society is an oil consumer nation only, or whether it is both a producer and consumer of oil. The position occupied by the society on the exchange scale determines how such society views oil and its production. According to NDES Briefing Notes (1995), oil production activities in Nigeria started in 1937, when Shell D'archy (later Shell B.P.) was the only concessionaire in this sector. Later, concession was given to foreign companies like Agip, Amoseas (now Texaco/Chevron), Gulf, Mobil and Safrap (ELF) by Balewa's government in the early sixties in order to increase production for domestic and export purposes.

However, Khan (1994) states that oil was first discovered in commercial quantity in 1956 at Oloibiri in the present day Bayelsa state. Oloibiri is about 90 kilometers west of Port Harcourt, the capital of Rivers State. Continuing, Khan writes that the initial export of oil commenced in 1958 with the completion of terminal and feeder pipelines in Bonny Island. Between 1960 and 1965, crude oil production in Nigeria increased from 857, 000 metric tonnes to 13.7m metric tonnes. But the years of the Nigerian civil war (1967-1970) saw a drop in oil production capacity. The above views were collaborated by scholars like Forest (1995); Nweke (1981), Chiefs and Peoples of Rivers State (1992).

With the recorded increase in oil production, and the revenue accruing to the nation few years after the civil war (1974), oil became the major economic base of the nation. It constituted over 80% of total revenue; over 90% of export earnings of the federation and eight-eight percent of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (Chiefs and Peoples of Rivers State, 1992; U.S, Energy Information administration, 1997; and Khan, 1994.)

Though oil is a major economic earner for the country, its production activities left on its trail diverse influences in the localities of operation of the Multinational Corporations (MNCs) (who are the major operators in this sector). In most cases, the natural inhabitants become poorer, communities are beset by crises, the environment is degraded and even the peoples' production style altered (Chiefs and People of Rivers State, 1992; Kariboro, 1997; World Bank Report, 1997).

The production style of a people is a window to the people's way of life. It can reveal the depth of a people's cultural practices. That is why this work is geared to study how oil production activities by the MNCs operating within Rivers State and the Niger Delta in general contribute to the perceived changing cultural pattern of Ikwerre people in the areas of traditional political authority, language, religious worship and dressing code. According to Wahua (1987), the main occupations of the Ikwerre people are farming and fishing because they inhabit large expanse of fertile land and most of their communities are permeated by creeks and rivulets, which drain finally into the Atlantic Ocean.

To study change in a place, a brief analysis of the people's culture is imperative. Culture may be viewed as a people's way of life; or cultivated perceptual pattern; that is, how a people see the world. In the views of Anikpo (1999), Wolff (1999) and Taylor (1992), culture is both the material and non-material aspects of a people's way of life, which manifests in the way they produce their material goods and value system. The latter proposition shows that through learning, training and drilling, we cultivate and instill in our minds those perceptions and patterns which become the culture of a people. Culture has been described as dynamic rather than static (Benedict, 1963; Gray and McGuigan, 1993; Nduka, 1993; Anikpo, 1999; and Anele, 2004). Anything to the contrary may not be the case for the Ikwerre people. Importantly, the assumption for change and the pattern of change need be studied critically and this is the concern of this work.

Gray and McGuigan (1993) and Beals, et al (1997), conceptualize that change could be global, national, regional and even self-inflicting or, it can be endogenous or exogenous in origin. Therefore, the study of change in culture is the study of the means by which human beings develop cultural adaption to changing external circumstances; which is the aim of this study.

Empirically, it has been observed that oil is Nigeria's major economic base as it accounts for about 95% of the nation's foreign exchange; premised on the above, oil has unequivocally gained prominence in Nigeria and in the world at large and as such many scholastic materials abound for both students and the general public; for example:

- (1) The price of oil, Nigerian Scholars (2001).
- (2) Environmental and Health Implications of oil production, Achebe (2000).
- (3) World Bank, Big Oil and the Niger Delta, Harmon Z. (1997).
- (4) Corporate Human Rights Violations: Activities of Oil Companies in Nigeria, Ismi A. (2003).

A critical appraisal of the literature shows that work has been done on oil production activities of the MNOCs, globally, nationally and even regionally (e.g. the Niger Delta Region); by international organizations, governments and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), but to our knowledge not much has been done on the changing cultural pattern due to oil production activities of the MNOCs operating within the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. They are host to most of the corporate establishments of the MNCs and their operation areas, especially the Obio/Akpor group e.g. Agip in Rumueme, Shell in Rumuobiakani etc.

To be able to make contribution in this area, theoretically and empirically, certain questions beg for clarifications and they are; is oil production activity the basic cause of culture change in the region?

What is the pattern and extent of change in the people's culture as a result of the prevalence of MNCs in the area?

What are the possible benefits and consequences of the MNCs operations on the people's way of life?

In the forthcoming section this paper is set to explore the changing pattern of the people's culture in the face of oil production activities in the nation and there after suggest ways in order not to discard the people's heritage.

BRIEF ABOUT IKWERRE

This section elicits the socio-economic history of the Ikwerre people and how oil production activities have contributed to the changes perceived in the people's culture. Also, how the observed change has affected their production pattern, political structure, religious worship, dressing code and use of language.

Geographically, Ikwerre ethnic nationality is divided into four Local Government Areas (Emohua, Ikwerre, Obio/Akpor and Port Harcourt). According to Otonnaa (1990), Ikwerre land is an undulating plane watered by the Ikwerre channel, christened the New Calabar River by the colonial administration. It lies within the tropical rain forest of the coast of Guinea.

The Ikwerre channel (New Calabar River) flows longitudinally through the entire length of Ikwerre and bisects the land into two sectors; the eastern and western. The eastern sector in turn is bisected by a trunk road running from Port Harcourt through Omerelu to Owerri, the capital of Imo State, while the western sector is bisected by the East-West road, which links Rivers State with Akwa Ibom, Edo and Delta States.

The intersecting point of lines of latitude 5°N and longitude 5°E lies within the heart of Ikwerreland. The prevailing winds are the Southwest monsoon in the rainy season (May to October) and the northeast trade wind in the dry season (November to April). Also, the vegetative cover of the area is the dense tropical rain forest with such rank trees as the iroko, obeche, mahogany, black and white afara, cotton trees, rubber, raffia, oil palm etc.

Socio-culturally, Amadi-Nnaa (1993), states that there is very pronounced affinity in the culture of all clans, towns and villages in Ikwerre. The language of communication is Ikwerre, but a group of linguistic scholars (Williamson, 1993) call it 'Igboid'. According to them there is intelligibility and some inflexions in such languages as Ogba, Ekpeye, Ikwerre and Igbo. For this paper, the Amadi-Nnaa's account holds and the latter disregarded, because that is still a way of encouraging and supporting the major ethnic groups in Nigeria to suppress and oppress the minorities of which Ikwerre is one.

The political administration in Ikwerre rests squarely on the Ohna system. Ohna institution is strictly by the oldest Owhor (staff of office) holder of each family, lineage, town and clan. This institution can hardly be abused or manipulated, because it is a sacred one. A person graduates into the Ohna system as of right and not wealth, influence or fame. That is, it is achieved by age, descent, integrity and honesty.

From within the Ohna of a village, town or clan, the oldest man and a direct descendant of the founder of the particular place is recognized and crowned the paramount ruler. The paramount ruler oversees the affairs of his people with the assistance of the ohna-in-council (owhor holders) and every adult male member of that community. For short, ascension to the highest seat or throne) of a community is based on what Ehuruigwe (1985) states as, "heredity and gerontocracy" (decent and age); this idea is, supported by Amadi-Nnaa, Otonnaa and oral history.

Women are excluded from the Ohna, but there exists the women's council. The exclusion of women from the Ohna is due to the patriarchal tradition of Ikwerre. A patriarchal society is such where men dominate the socio-economic and political spheres of the society, as authority flows through men basically because the labour of women in the areas of child bearing, home keeping and gathering of food is not quantified fiscally and therefore, not valued (Scupin 1995).

The style of religious worship is same for all. The Ikwerre people believe in the existence of a "Supreme Deity" (God) called Chiokike; they also believe in the passage through a medium (lesser deities) to the Supreme Being (Nyewhusirim-Obe 1989). Each community has its own deity and the chief priest of such a deity is viewed as the link between the people and their ancestors, who they regard as the custodian of the people's customs, tradition, protection, fertility etc. There are days set aside for worship in the communities, which may be eke or riagbo depending on the sector the community belongs (eastern or western). They employ divination, libation and sacrifices as means of worship. The deity priests are expected to be pious, sincere and righteous, (Weneka, in Nduka 2001 and Oral History).

The social structure and organization in Ikwerre land are not different from other societies of the world. That is, in any society, people do not occupy the same position/status in patriarchal societies, which Ikwerre is, men occupy different positions, perform different roles and are rewarded differently according to what value the society sets on their achievements, (women's achievements are not classified, rather, they enhance the status of their husbands). Otonnaa writes that, different ranks are graded according to degrees of super ordination or sub-ordination. These indicate the level of stratification in the society, which can be economic, political, occupational or biological (age, sex, heredity) and all the areas work together for the good of the society. So, such titles as dimngba, ochialiri, onnu mbam, eze iji and many more are achieved.

Economically, the main occupations of the people are farming, hunting and fishing. Simple implements are employed in the process. The quality of an individual's produce determines his status within the community. This warranted polygyny and acquisition of slaves, as the latter's labour were needed on the farms.

Labour was provided mainly within the family by family members, in-laws, age grade and labourers. Daily wage labour was remunerated by feeding the worker three times a day only or he is paid little amount or stipend and fed once a day. Division of labour existed along sex and age lines. The method of instruction was the guild system (Haralambos 1998 and Wahua 1987). The Ikwerre people have reciprocal relationships with their neighbors; the Kalabari, Okirika, Abua, Ekpeye and Igbo. Excess produce from their annual harvest was preserved for consumption and planting in the next season. They practice shift farming (Anikpo 1999 and Wahua 1987). Finally, the mode of building, dressing, marriage, relaxation and jurisprudence are the same among the units, towns and villages (Otonnaa, 1993 and Orlu called from Nduka, 1993) that compose Ikwerre nation.

At this juncture, we cannot but state that the way of life of Ikwerre people is similar in any town, community or clan of Ikwerre extraction. Again, each community is at various stages of undergoing change, this is occasioned by the location, position of the elites and the youths. The people's perception and expectation account for some conflict in their way of life; which we observe and experience currently amongst the people.

Some concepts are at this point operationalised for clearer understanding:-

Production- This is the process of utilizing available tools, technology and nature to generate means of sustenance; therefore, oil production is considered as the ability to use modern and sophisticated tools of technology to extract from the earth's bowels crude oil for the sustenance of such people or nation.

Change- According to Longman Contemporary Dictionary is to stop doing or having one thing and start having or doing something else instead. Therefore, changing cultural pattern is the process whereby the total way of life of a people alters from what it is known to be to a new or different form as a result of production activities on-going in the environment.

Ikwerre Ethnic Nation- Is a collection of people who are homogenous in characteristics and in the northern recess of Rivers State in South-South Nigeria.

Ehi- Is a native cow used for spiritual rituals during cleansing or purification purposes.

Ohna- Is a council which is a composite of heads of families who hold staff of offices on behalf of their various families; therefore, are the administration in a given community.

Purposefully, Rumueme and Rumuobiakani were chosen as area of study since they host the major MNOPCs establishments and the responses and results reached are representative of the perceived changes in the region. The communities were clustered and systematically a sample size of five hundred respondents was contacted. These represented the Chiefs in-council, elders, opinion leaders, women and youth groups.

Dialectical Materialism, is the theoretical thrust of this paper; and it is an aspect of Hegel and Marx' philosophy. This perspective is chosen because dialectical movement represents a struggle of opposites, a conflict of contradictions. Conflict provides the dynamic principle, the source of change. Marx argues that the major dynamics for social change lies in the contradictions and conflicts within the economic system .Since all parts of society are interconnected and it is only through the process of interplay between these parts that change occurs.

At the end of this investigation, this paper exposes that oil production in Nigeria has impacted on the Niger Delta in general and the Ikwerre ethnic nation in particular. The account is as contained below; according to Geoffrey Lean (2001), oil has brought little but misery to the people of Niger Delta of which Rivers State and Ikwerre people are a part. In his work, he highlights how oil production has ruined the area, while leaving the local people poorer and more ill than other Nigerians in such ways as through oil spill and pollution, which has devastated and degraded the environment. Also, through seismic activities, building of roads, canals and houses, gas flaring and population pressure. The above view is heavily supported by World Bank (1995) Report on Environment, Natufe Igho (2001), Mbendi Profile (2004), Achebe (2001).

Some scholars purport that people's safety and security have been grossly endangered through the state and Multinationals' misuse of the military and arms; resulting in deaths, destruction of towns, fire outbreaks and the growing state of ethnic militia (Natufe, Naanen, Green Peace, 2001; Achebe, 2001; Jemikalaja David, Kearney Bill, 2003; World Bank, 1997). The next section will be used to access the emerging cultural trend.

In the context of this work, the first emerging cultural trend is religion, which has been discerned and documented by such scholar as Marx in Haralambos (1998), "(that religion as) the sigh of the oppressed creature, the sentiment of the heartless world and the soul of the soulless. It is the opium of the people. Religion acts as an opiate to dull the pain produced by oppression". Little wonder then why Nigerians and the Ikwerre people have abandoned their traditional worship style which made use of rituals, sacrilege and belief in retributive justice for the alien Christian religion. Christianity and its adherents view traditional religions as bad and fetish as it does not pretend heavenly bliss after death. Religion also, is being known to help the rich to maintain their status quo. Religion has also become a very good source of revenue for the unemployed and especially those who have acquired the dexterity of preaching the gospel to the majority who are poor and believe that the kingdom of God is for the poor and that every good thing comes from God.

The language of the indigenous people is fast disappearing due to the ongoing 'melting pot', which the area has become for all nationalities, Gordon (1978) as 'pidgin English' has become the lingua franca (unofficial). Noticeable also, is the individualistic residential patterns with imposing fences, gates, security dogs and guards in order to ward off intruders at the expense of collective or communal residence (Otonnaa 1993 and Salau in Nkom 2000). Another residential pattern is the emergence of squatter settlements where the less privileged and poor reside due to high cost of rent age and insufficient accommodation for the teeming population in the urban area, squatter settlements and overcrowded areas are conducive environments for social problems like water borne diseases, respiratory tract infections (ITIs), fire outbreaks and hide-outs for criminals (Achebe 2001, Worlu 2000 and Onorkhoraye 2000).

The capitalist mode of production is the vogue, whereby most Nigerians have become proletariat either due to the fact that the land decree of 1978 disposes them of their land with or without compensation and the people's fear of losing their land to MNOPCs or the state; sell the land, which had been a symbol of unity and strength in the olden days (Achinewu 1993 in Nduka, Anikpo 1999).

Due to the educational system of the society and proletarianisation of most Nigerians, there is mass movement of people from the rural to the urban areas for white collar jobs, which may be non-existent and then, the attendant consequent criminal activities (Kariboro, 1996; 2001; Rivers Chiefs and Peoples, 1992). The relaxation and entertainment style of the people which include such traits as playground, dances and dress codes, which are sources of identity are also undergoing changes as the playgrounds are sold, town halls converted to prayer houses and native dances viewed by many as satanic, (Weneka in Nduka (1993).

Another emerging trend is in the area of political authority and incessant civil unrest. To this end, (Mbendi Profile (2004), Price of Oil, Corporate Human Right, Michael Hunt (1997), common dreams and DAMN damn@tao.ca argue that the Niger Deltans are not adequately represented in the National Government. So, the few who are educated realizing the extent of exploitation and oppression going on in Nigerian polity, organize and mobilize their people against this perceived phenomenon.

Most of the influential citizens of the Zone have been harassed, suppressed and even killed. The examples are the killing of Senator (Dr) Obi Wali and Ken Saro-Wiwa in the 90s; their death served as springboards for increase in territorial unrest as there became an increase in the number of groups, asking for the recognition of the peril the Zone is into, due to oil production. Among the groups are: the Ijaw National Council (INC), Ikwerre Youth Council (IYC), Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP) and more.

Before the discovery and production of oil in commercial quantity and the same becoming the main economic base of the nation, Nigerian economy has been monetized, (Ake 1985). That, Turner describes as commercial economy, because we are not producers rather merchants and petty traders thereby creating the comprador bourgeois, who were the allies of the Europeans and political leaders of the nation.

Post-independently, the groomed political leaders who took over from the whites and described by Dickens Charles as “blacks in white clothing” encouraged the continued exploitation and exploration of the people’s natural resources to the advantage of their European allies and countries through the MNOPCs, an agent of imperialism, Ake (1985). Supporting this, Darah (2001) writes that the exploitative structures of economics and politics introduced by European powers were inherited by post-independent Nigerian governments.

Cognizing the importance of oil to the Nigerian economy and the world at large, the nation’s political class made such policies as land acquisition decree 1978, Petroleum Act 1968 and derivation principle in order to continuously suppress and oppress the zone where the natural resources abound as they are the minorities of the nation and also to subordinate the nation’s economy to the core (developed economy); without making deliberate efforts to encourage production and downplay consumption. In support of the foregone, Darah continues that the Petroleum Act; have rendered the oil producing states virtual colonial fiefdoms fit for only plunder.

It is observed that the dominance of the comprador bourgeoisie in the political and economic scenes of Nigeria, their policies and administrative style have consistently driven Nigeria deeper into the stranglehold of international capitalist economic configurations whereby a commercial capitalist economy is enthroned by encouraging importation, distribution, consumption, wholesale, retail and petty trading and discouraging production (manufacture) have far-reaching manifestations.

The manifestations are many and varied and so, some are discussed for the purpose of this work. (a) The comprador bourgeoisie in alliance with the MNCs make huge sums of money through importation of all sorts of goods (both substandard and over-bloated invoices) defraud the nation of huge capital, use same to buy their ways to the political arena and thence display their wealth flagrantly. The society honors them by giving them titles without consideration for how they made their wealth. This has a “demonstration effect” on the populace. The natives whose lands were acquired for oil production activities are left poorer and deprived and so, they resort to parcelisation of their remaining land for sale as commodities to be able to benefit from the oil largesse. It conforms to the proverbial saying in Ikwerre “Nye ehnia n’ agbawhu, gubiria o’ odu.”

(b) Through the payment of compensation for the parcel(s) of land acquired by the oil industries and sometimes sales of land, there is increase cash flow in the hands of community members. Some members of the community use their own shares from the land income to establish new businesses such as business centres, eating places, etc, thereby eschewing communality and enthroning individuality and competition. Such phenomena like unequal exchange, alienation and dispossession occur, Jalee (1977).

(c) With the springing up of new businesses and the free flow of cash in the hands of the MNOPCs workers and some natives, the need for relaxation arises at the end of a hard day's job; this brings about night life, Anikpo (1999). When nightlife ensues, girls are attracted to the scene with the intention to benefit from the oil windfall and such term as prostitution is used. Boys are not left out, as they engage in gangsterism, alcoholism and even armed robbery.

(d) With dispossession and alienation going on and: "non-functional education to the economic need of the people" Ezewu (1985), there is reserve army of labour; this makes the youths to mobilize themselves and consistently disrupt the activities of the MNOPCs. This sometimes irks the federal/state governments who draft the armed forces (military) to quell the situation. Some of the encounter between the youths and the military leave a lot of people killed and communities sometimes destroyed and sacked; examples are Umuechem, (1991), Odi (1999) and Choba (2000).

(e) In order to counter the military prowess, there is the formation of several ethnic militias in the Niger delta, (Darah in Ozo-Eson & Ukoha, 2001).

(f) As oil is continuously regarded as the national cake, this leads to the influx of various peoples of the world into the region for daily bread (subsistence). Movement of people into the area has brought about population pressure (not by birth rate) in the area, pressure on existing infrastructure and the consequent hike in rent.

(g) Others have specifically built worship centres in order to have the piece of the cake through religious activities, as all men have the need for God- the giver of all good things. This confirms the view of Marx that religion is an opiate to the people's mind.

(h) Also, the dressing code and lingua franca of the people, are giving way for a commonly and easily accepted way of dressing and communication-all are foreign. Dress mode and language have been described, as a way of people's identity and integration. The disruption makes it difficult to distinguish the different people in the area easily and the need for an easy means of communication.

(i) Another area of manifestation is the disruption in the traditional authority, which is occasioned by the fact that, the 'nouveau riche' in the area are suspecting the traditional rulers as benefiting from the MNOPCs and nation's government. This has generated a lot of wrangles and crises in many communities; for instance, Rumuobiakani, Oginiba, Ogbogoro to mention just a few. The internal rancor has persistently led to continuous exploitation and expropriation of the people's natural endowment and thereby compromise developmental strides; as a "house divided amongst its self cannot stand"; a hitherto biblical injunction.

Conclusively, it has clearly been established by both the indigenes and non indigenes that the culture of the people has undergone tremendous change. However, there are variations and degrees, depending on the area/place and the major means of production and the government interest. First, the observed changes started when the colonialists made contact with the indigenous people at about the 19th century. So, the oil production in its right consolidated what was and that is why, the dressing mode, residential pattern, worship pattern and above all the indigenous language which is a means of communication has reached almost a stage of extinction and by that eroding the people's identity and solidarity.

Also, it was established that the change was necessary because the heterogeneity of the populace was a sure vehicle for alteration in a region's way of life because no man is an island, more especially in the face of advance communication technology, especially in the era of communication revolution through ICT (Information & Communication Technology).

In the light of the above observations and facts the entire people of the nation need total and complete re-orientation by their way of producing material goods, political administration and more importantly their ideological values as no person (people) is above his/her consciousness or perception.

Second, the political leaders of this nation should uphold the general welfare of the people above personal interest for no one is greater than the whole (all). Since one man's riches in an environment means abject poverty for all.

Third, there should be complete overhauling of the nation's educational system thereby, making the graduates of all tiers of education to be functional ; thereby reducing to the barest minimum the reserve army of labour syndrome as well as its attendant variant social vices.

Next, is the issue of resource control, which will be a thing of the past if the national government shall introduce equity and fair play in the allocation of the proceeds from oil production, bearing in mind that during the regionalized administrations of this country that each region was developed based on the amount of resources harnessed in such region. Today the contrast is the trend, where the region that accounts for more than 90% of the country's total revenue is starved to death infrastructurally. A trip to Abuja, the Federal Capital Territory sends a nostalgic reminiscence of man's inhumanity to man as no area of Ikwerre and not even the entire Niger Delta can be compared with it (FCT); which in no way is closest to the devastated and exploited region.

Finally, when equity, fair play and justice in the allocation and distribution of proceeds from oil production which is the nation's major revenue source as would be reflected on infrastructural distribution, political participation and personal and material security then the people would be proud of their culture and would do everything to ensure that their identity is not lost or discarded; even if it has to be affected it would be minimal and even gradual; for we agree that no culture is static, rather dynamic. Emphatically, with the state of distortion in the people's culture; when oil ceases to be the major income earner for the nation; the zone would be faced with numerous problems as reference will not be made to it, because of its minority outlook. With devastated land, water and air, survival in the area will be unpredictable as virtually every institution is bastardized.

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