

## THE INFLUENCE OF CULTURAL PRACTICES IN PEACE-BUILDING PROCESS IN THE NIGER DELTA REGION

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### ABSTRACT

*The study focused on the influence of cultural practices on peace-building process in the Niger Delta region. The population of the study consists of the inhabitants of the sampled communities in Delta, Bayelsa and Rivers state. The descriptive survey design was adopted. Stratified proportional random sampling technique was used to select a total of one thousand four hundred and sixty five (1465) respondents from three local government areas each of Delta, Bayelsa and Rivers state. A self constructed questionnaire was used for the data collection. The content validity of the instrument was determined by three experts from the Faculty of Education, University of Benin and the reliability co-efficient of 0.84 was obtained for the instrument and the data was analyzed using multiple regression statistics. The findings of the study revealed that cultural practices significantly influence peace-building in the region ( $F_{(4, 1465)} = 642.946; p < 0.05$ ) and they jointly contributed 64% of the variance of the dependent measure. The order of the relative contributions is as follows: Oath taking ( $\beta = .462$ ), Taboo system ( $\beta = .335$ ), Use of festivals ( $\beta = .158$ ) and use of oracle ( $\beta = .076$ ). It was concluded that Oath taking, Taboo system, Use of festivals and use of oracle enhanced peace-building process in the region. Based on the findings, it was however recommended that cultural practices should be used as a means of building peace in the region and also cultural festivals should be rekindled amongst community members. Festival serves as a means of bringing the people together and it will foster peace, love and unity in the community.*

**Keywords:** Cultural practices, Peace-building, Influence, Niger Delta

### INTRODUCTION

All over the world, the peace has continued to hunt the mind of people irrespective of greed, colour, and race, ethnic and religious affiliation. According to Oduaran (1996), war, hatred, bitterness, rivalries, carnage, conspiracy and treacherous plots are some of the most conspicuous alternative concept and corollaries to the desirable and soothing concept of peace. Peace is desirable in creating the harmonious relationship needed to ensure meaningful sustainable development. Peace is considered a desirable goal for everyone – even if violence is inevitable. It is a great idea that the world had continued to dream about. Peace enable us develop in people a set of dynamics and purposeful attitudes which assist the beneficiaries to search for and uphold the value of justice and human rights. Hence, there has been frantic effort aimed at discerning the world and promoting world peace. This presupposes that peace is the end product of conflict resolution. The greatest threat to world peace arises from the fact that conflict is an inevitable part of life. Ogonor (2004) observed that it is a part of human nature to disagree. However, it is important and instructive to note that it is the management of conflict rather than its occurrence that has been the bane of effort aimed at promoting peace as well as attaining developing a peaceful environment needed to ensure or

guarantee proper sustainable and meaningful development in the world as a whole and in the Niger Delta in particular. Even other efforts are still being made to ensure that conflicts are properly managed or nipped in the bud as they occur for the sustenance of peace and stimulation of sustainable development. These efforts have continued unabated and will continue until world peace is guaranteed. This explains why Jegede (2000) said that the United Nations came into existence to stabilize international relations and give peace a more sense of foundation.

Peace is considered a desirable goal for everyone – even if violence is inevitable. It is a great idea that the world continued to dream about. Peace enable us develop in people a set of dynamics and purposeful attitudes which assist the beneficiaries to search for and uphold the value of justice and human rights. Hence, there has been frantic effort aimed at discerning the world and promoting world peace. This presupposes that peace is the end product of conflict resolution. The African continent has not been left out of this. The effort aimed at promoting peace have been no less intensive in Africa particularly in Nigeria, the state of ethnic-based crises or conflicts have tended to undermine all efforts aimed at achieving peace.

In Nigeria, there have been incessant ethnic-based crises resulting from emergence of ethnic-based groups such as the Oodua People Congress (O.P.C), Arewa People Congress,(A.P.C), The Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP), Egbesu boys and Pan Igbo youth federation amongst others. Some of these groups are militant and violent in nature. Their existence in Jegede's (2000) opinion has made the fragile relationship in the country to be further threatened, the Niger Delta region where most of these groups developed has been worse heat. It was thought that the installation of a democratic government will reduced the rate of violence and brings about peace for the people but that has not been the case in the Niger Delta Region. Rather the institution of civil rule has instead helped to heightened tension because of escalation of violence, armed robbery, ethnic clashes, religious crises and violent agitation for fair equitable and better distribution of available resources in the national cake as it is commonly referred to. The country has continued to witness an excruciating devastating and unprecedented social ethnic religious conflict. The situation is such that the history of some part of the country particularly, the Niger Delta Region has become the history of struggle and crises.

The peace of the region has been threatened by violent protests pervading the Niger Delta are undertaken by youth associations of various ethnic groups and clans (Obari, 1998). The Niger Delta agitations and violent protests which are daily confronting oil companies and the Federal Government pertain to issues which are central to national unity, stability, economic well being, and resource control and government performance. Okonmah (2001) noted that the grievances of the Niger Deltas have involved three closely inter related, but analytical issues. Firstly, that all laws relating to oil exploration and land ownership be abrogated. Secondly, the issue of natural resource control and self determination and thirdly, that appropriate institutional and financial arrangements should be put in place by the Nigeria nation State and the oil multinational to compensate the oil producing communities for the developmental and environmental problems associated with oil exploration and exploitations. According to Onduku (2001), the conflict has therefore been made complex and worse by the goal – blocking behaviours practiced by the parties.

The Niger Delta crisis has become a source of concern to both local and international observers including non-governmental organization (NGOS). As a result, many of these NGOs have initiated programmes and peace forum towards addressing the lingering crisis in the region. One of such NGOs is the Niger Delta Environmental Survey (NDES). Funded by an oil firm, in partnership with local community initiated, developed and designed an open-

uni model programme aimed at providing good network for the institution and capacity building for youths in the area (Ogboi, 2003). Other NGOS like the Environmental Rights Action/Friends of the Earth (ERAFE), Nigeria and Pro-Natural International communities to the activities of the oil companies and the federal government in the Niger Delta and articulating clearly what the problem are and how they can be resolved.

In the same vein, successive governments have experimented with various strategies to ameliorate the development gap in oil producing communities. Some of the strategies include:

1. The establishment of interventionist agency known as the Presidential Task Force popularly known as 1.5 percent committee replaced the NDDDB in 1980.
2. The formation of the Oil Mineral Producing Area Development Commission (OMPADEC) was set up by decree No 23 of 1992 was to rehabilitate, carry out infrastructural and manpower development, offer environmental protection, and pollution services. (Chokor and Obadan, 2006).
3. The setting aside of 13 % of net contribution of proceed of oil as the Derivation Fund to develop the oil producing areas.
4. The Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) was established in 1999 by President Olusegun Obasanjo to deal urgently with the developmental needs of the Niger Delta and bring sustainable prosperity and peace to the area.

The expectation is that the setting up of the NDDC will bring development to the region thereby addressing the basic human needs of identity, freedom, well-being and survival and thereby significantly contributes towards the realization of sustainable peace through peace building in the Niger Delta area. However, the impact of the commission has not been felt in the region especially in the rural areas and this has further worsened the crisis situation in the region. The Niger Delta Peace forum was initiated by late President Umar Musa Yar'dua in 2007 comprising the governors of oil producing communities, oil companies operating in the area and all other stake-holders to chart a new course to address the lingering crisis in the area in order to bring peace and development to the region. In the same vein, the Ministry of the Niger Delta was created to further address the problem of the region and also an amnesty programme was created by the federal government in June, 2009 where militants are required to surrender their weapons and in return received presidential pardon, education, training and access to rehabilitation programme. All these are aimed at bringing peace to the Niger Delta.

The problem of the Niger Delta region still persist till date in spite of the various intervention agencies and programmes put in place by government and NGOs to address the problem. The question is how then peace can be maintained in the Niger Delta region in the face of these crisis and agitations. Against this backdrop, within the community there are cultural practices like oath taking, community taboos, oracle consultation and festivals used to maintained peace in the community. Community taboos are customs and beliefs of the people which are meant to be preserved. Members of the community are made to swear to an oracle or an oath if they go against these practices or beliefs. The effect of oath taking tends to bring peace among the community. It will therefore be necessary to take a look at these cultural practices and peace-building and see how the potentials of these practices can be harnessed and utilized to foster peace in the region.

## STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

In spite of the efforts of NGOS in organizing peace programmes and seminars and the various economic measures like the formation of OMPADEC, NDDC and the establishment

of the Ministry of Niger Delta by the present administration to address skill needs of the people and formulating and coordinating policies for the development of the Niger Delta region. Inter and intra communal conflicts, youth restiveness, hostage taking of oil workers and pipeline vandalization still pervade the region. The implication is that there cannot be any meaningful development in the midst of wars. That is why Jegede (2003) noted that peace is a necessary condition for development to take place. It is assumed that the existing structures and approaches used by government and the execution of community development projects in oil producing communities by oil companies will foster peace in the region but crisis still pervade the region. What can then be done to bring the desire peace and development to the region? The study therefore sought to investigate the extent to which cultural practices like (oath taking, taboos, festivals and oracle consultation) could influence peace-building in the Niger Delta Region.

### **PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

1. Determine whether Cultural Practices (such as oath taking, taboo system, oracle consultation and festivals) could influence peace-building in the region.
2. Find out the relative contributions of Cultural Practices on peace-building in the region.

### **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

1. To what extent will Cultural Practices (such as oath taking, taboo system, oracle consultation and festivals) predict peace-building in the Niger Delta Region?
2. What are the relative contributions of Cultural Practices to peace-building in the region?

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **Cultural Practices and Peace-Building**

Cultural Practices are practices that exist within the communities that help members in the process of building peace in the community. According to Ikimi (2001) cultural practices like village laws, customs and taboos are well known and taught to family members as they grew up. This is to afford members of the communities the opportunity to preserve their customs and traditions in order not to go contrary to these practices. Hence, the traditional sanction continues to be applied against persons who breach the norms and regulations by traditional authorities. In the words of Giadom (2009) cultural practices is a means of promoting peace, togetherness, love and unity among members and non – members of the communities. In the same vein, Agogo (2002) is of the view that cultural beliefs are seen as statement that instils justifiable fears into people so as to enforce social norms. These cultural beliefs exist in terms of norms, customs, expectation and experiences. (Agogo, 2010)

The concept of taboo is not peculiar to the Niger Delta only but to the Africans generally. It is a universal phenomenon. According to Adekola (1989) every society of the world indeed each community or tribal group has its dos and don'ts which are traditionally referred to as "taboo". Belief in taboos still persists in several communities throughout the world. The Oxford Dictionary defines a taboo as an act or thing which religion or custom regards as forbidden, not to be touched, spoken of. Also, Encyclopaedia Americana sees taboo as a prohibition applying to something or set apart because it is sacred, consecrated or unclean and therefore, it is considered dangerous. Taboos according to Akinuli (1992) generally are strictly forbidden things, acts or action in traditional societies by religious custom or law.

The word “taboo” was first used in Polynesian where people who were to sacrifice and people who handled dead bodies were not to be touched. Taboos are actions or things which custom regards as forbidden, not to be touched or spoken of among others. The presence of such taboos reveals underlying fears and superstitions of a society. Omoregbe (2008) noted that taboos are bound in almost every aspect of the life of the people and sanctions are readily given to defaulters

In the view of Adedeji (1999) taboos in the traditional African settings are as old as the societies. They are formulated in the olden days to guide and regulate the activities of the citizens of a particular society against evil deeds and for self protection. For instance, in several part of Yoruba land, it was an offence to whistle in the night. This they feel was to avoid evil spirit or invite reptiles such as snakes. In addition, a general assessment however shows that most of these taboos are observed to promote peace and stability within the immediate environment and the world in general.

Idris (1992) opines that the advent of taboos, infraction and the resultant consequences dated back to the bible. There, God reportedly said, you may freely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat them, you shall die. It was truly observed that both Adam and Eve (the first creators) went against this taboo and God punished them accordingly. According to theologians, the significance of this incident was to imbibe into man the habits of obedience, humility and respect in human actions. It was because Adam and Eve could not sustain these qualities in the taboo or the instruction given to them that earned them the heavenly discipline, the core of which was death.

From the review, it could be seen that taboos are used to promote peace and harmony in African society and discouraged unruly behaviour among communities. Anyone who goes contrary to laid norms received punishment from the gods or their ancestors.

**Oath taking** can generally be defined as religious, moral and psychological enforcement of an act over an agreed situation, or a confirmation of the truth by naming something held sacred, a statement or promise confirm by an appeal to a sacred higher being to enforce the attached sanction. Oath taking is essentially religious. It binds two people together in a mutual confidence that there would not be a betrayal of the confidence they repose in one another. There is often the appeal to a higher power who is believed to be unbiased towards or against any party involved in the oath taking, while at the same time, the higher power served as a witness or / and as a potential sanction to punish whosoever fail to carry out the statement promised on oath. The higher power could be God, a local deity, a natural deity, a deceased ancestor or even a moral body.

Christianity and Islam also adopt the practice of oath-taking, their advocates swear on their holy written book and on the names of their deities or God. In some of their ceremonies, oath-taking is ritualized and demanded as a prerequisite for either ordination or for the acceptance of a religion or religious office. Apart from the appeal to God, people present at the oath-taking ceremony are called upon to witness the ritual. Osborne in James (2000) is of the opinion that oath is a covenant that binds whoever hear it. He further gave some function of oath taking to include the following:

- a. Oath taking foster unity among communities
- b. It enhances mutual trust between the parties contracting the covenant.
- c. It also enforces loyalty and faithfulness.

James (2000) opines that imbibing the spirit of oath taking, that is, social ills that pervade our nation today will disappear totally because it has been the practice of our forefather in the past to checkmate social vices in various African communities swearing with objects with its attendant consequences has been efficacious and helped tremendously in reducing crime in the past. All the aforementioned functions result in peaceful and harmonious co-existence in the society. For any society to make any meaningful progress there must be peace, for no progress can be made in a chaotic situation. It is only in a peaceful atmosphere that progress can flourish. And before there can be peaceful atmosphere, the people in a particular community or society must live together harmoniously. Living together harmoniously however entails understanding, tolerance, accommodation of each other's differences, respect of each other's opinion, mutual trust, lack of suspicion, equal right, imbibing the principle of dialogue and the guarantee of individual right and privileged. All these ensure peace and tranquillity.

Furthermore, Nwolise (2005) cited two cases from the eastern part of Nigeria where traditional approaches was used to resolve conflict and restore lasting peace to the communities involved. The traditional formulae which led to the peaceful resolution of the Aguleri – Umuleri Umuohaba Anam war involved oath taking, declaration of no more war peace treaty and the performance of a cleansing ritual called Ikomme. In resolving the Umunebo – Umuokuzu land dispute, the Umuada (female born in a place but married out to other areas) decided that both clans would go for oath-taking as a strategy to break the stalemate. The oath was to find out the truth about the rightful owners of the land. The land was finally shared among the two communities involved in the dispute. The reconciliation rites involved and included collective prayers, drinking from the same cups and eating from same plates which has brought lasting peace to the area.

In conclusion, oath-taking is the process of conflict resolution in African society hinges on the recognition of the ancestral power and authority. It confirms the ritual sanctions of the ancestors in dispute settlement and this often induces fear of the supernatural. Reconciliation is purposeful 'functional and performable. The living elders as mediators and interveners do so to assuage injured feelings, to restore peace, to reach a compromise acceptable to both disputants as sanctioned by the ancestors. This is followed by a ceremony to serve as a confirmatory test of the end of conflict. It ensures that each party to the conflict "gives a little- gets a little", suggesting that there exists no victor or vanquished in the process of reconciliation in African societies.

The term *festival* is derived from Latin word 'festivus' which means joyful. It is a public celebration, held to commemorate an important event of a community or place (Agogo; 2001, Oziogu; 2011). According to Oziogu (2011), originally, a festival was exclusively religious and most of them are still associated with religious observances. It is widely described as a religious celebration that expresses man's feelings, his fears and his appreciation. He went further to say that there is no clear cut difference between feast and festival but while most people regard feast as happy family celebration, most churches refers to it as a joyous religious service in the religious sense, feast is described as a time when people worship God in a spirit of joy and thanksgiving for favours granted or to be granted. The Jews celebrated feasts to acknowledge the great and marvellous works of God upon their lives. A few among them are Passover (Deut.5:12-15), the Sabbath (Ex 20; 1) the feast of weeks or Pentecost commemorating the giving of the law (Lev 23:15) e.t.c. And generally too, people uphold festival for the same reason as feast.

In Nigeria, cultural festival is a periodic celebration by people of a community to commemorate a notable event (Oziogu, 2011). According to Oziogu (2011) cultural festival

plays vital roles in the social, economic and political life of a nation like Nigeria. These roles include the following:

- I. It promotes political, social and economic activities of the people.
- II. It transmits ideas, knowledge, understanding and aspirations as well as the philosophy of the people for meaningful living.
- III. It is a sort of home – coming by the sons and daughters of the soil from various towns and cities of Nigeria and abroad after a long period of separation.
- IV. It serves as a forum for neighbouring communities, families and individuals to mend wounds among its embittered community members and individuals and to cement relationship with one another.
- V. It also serves as a forum for eligible marriageable bachelors and spinsters to meet their life partner, make new friends and to exchange addresses.
- VI. It serves as a forum to take necessary steps towards enhancing the development of the communities.
- VII. It promotes the cultural heritage of the community to the outside world. The sons and daughters of the community buy the craft and take them to the cities as souvenirs for their friends’ office, colleagues and directors, thereby promoting their cultural heritage.
- VIII. It assists in popularizing the people and the community on the media by some organizations, thereby attracting tourists, foreigners and nationals to the scene during the next period of their cultural festivals.

## METHODOLOGY

The descriptive survey research design was adopted for the study. The target population for the study comprises the inhabitants of the sampled communities in Delta, Bayelsa and Rivers state. The sampled size was made up of a total of (1465) one thousand four hundred and sixty five respondents selected from three local government areas in each of Delta, Bayelsa and Rivers state. The sample was selected using stratified proportional random sampling technique. The instrument used for data collection was a questionnaire designed by the researchers and titled Cultural Practices and peace-building questionnaire (CPPB). To determine if the instrument was capable of measuring what it was designed to measure, it was face and content validated by three experts in the Faculty of Education, University of Benin. Thereafter, the instrument was pilot tested using a test re-test procedure in order to determine its reliability. It was administered twice within an interval of three weeks to a group of 30 inhabitants outside the study population. The collation and correlation of their responses using Pearson’s correlation statistics produced reliability co-efficient of 0.65. The data collected was analyzed using the multiple regression statistics.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

**Table I. Regression showing the joint effects of Cultural Practices such as (oath taking, taboo system, oracle consultation and festivals on Peace-Building**

<i>Source of variation</i>	<i>SS</i>	<i>DF</i>	<i>MS</i>	<i>F-Ratio</i>	<i>Sig. of P</i>	<i>R</i>	<i>R-Square</i>
Regression	3025.825	4	756.456	642.946	.000	.799	.0638
Residual	1718.936	1461	1.177				
Total	4744.761	1465					

Adj.  $R^2 = 637$

Table I shows that the variables of cultural practices, oath taking, taboo system, oracle consultation and festivals have a multiple correlation of (R) of .799 on peace-building and multiple regression square ( $R^2$ ) of .638, the analysis of variance yielded an F-Ratio of 642.946 which is significant at 0.05 level of significance. The Table further shows that the four variables of cultural practices when combined effectively predicted peace-building in Delta, Bayelsa and Rivers States. The F- Ratio value of 642.946 obtained is also significant at 0.05 level of significance. This definitely, is an indication of its effectiveness in predicting peace-building in the region. Cultural Practices as can be seen accounted for about 64% of the variation by the independent variables.

### Relative Contributions of Cultural Practices on Peace-Building process in the region

**Table II. Relative Contributions of cultural practices on peace-building in the Niger Delta Region**

Variable	Unstandardised Coefficient		Standardised Coefficient	F	Sig.
	B	SE( $\beta$ )	Beta Contribution		
(Constant)	0.345	0.033		10.576	0.000
Use of festival will foster the maintenance of peace	1.105	0.129	0.232	8.555	0.000
Taboo system will make people to obey laws	1.545	0.124	0.335	12.414	0.000
Use of oracle will foster peace in the region	0.945	0.197	0.076	4.792	0.000
Oath Taking will ensure peaceful coexistence	2.332	0.082	0.462	28.410	0.000

Table II shows the extent to which each of the independent variables contributed relatively to peace-building in the region. The weight of their contributions is Use of festivals ( $\beta = .232$ ,  $p > .05$ ), Taboo System with ( $\beta = .335$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), Use of Oracle with ( $\beta = .076$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ), Oath taking ( $\beta = .462$ ,  $P < 0.05$ ). The result further shows that the use of festivals will foster maintenance of peace, taboo system and taking an oath before a deity were significant while the use of oracle is not significant.

### DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings in table I revealed that the joint effects of the independent variables of cultural practices of use of festival, taboo system and oath taking on peace-building process was significant. To confirm the findings of this study in relation to cultural practices, Ikimi (2001) stated village laws and customs as well as taboos were well known and taught to family members as they grew up. This is to enable community members obey the laws of the land and anyone who goes against these laws are punished. Ikimi (2001) also cited the case of women marching naked through the village to protest as a taboo and this could bring undue consequences to any community.

The findings also corroborate the views of Adewoye (1977) and Ojo (1973) who state that the supernatural influence on moral conduct of society facilitates peace and harmony. This is so because individuals jealously keep to the ethical rules which enhance peace and concord, lest they invite the wrath of the supernatural. Also, Ayisi (1979) writes that oath taking system is a significant feature of the administration of injustice among the Ashanti. Oath is sworn when one wants to have an offence redressed (Nwolise, 2005).



According to Olaoba (2005), oath taking is the process of conflict resolution in African society which hinges on the recognition of the ancestral power and authority. It confirms the ritual sanctions of the ancestors in dispute settlement and this often induces fear of the supernatural. Oath taking is used to established peace and prevent conflict in African society. Some of the practices used in the sampled communities include oath taking which is used to settled disputes, oracle consultation for truth finding. This is in line with two cases from the eastern part of Nigeria cited by Nwolise (2005) where oath taking was used to resolve the conflict between Aguleri – Umuleri Umuohaba Anam and Umunebo – Umuokuzu land dispute where the Umuada (female born in a place but married to another area) decided that both clans should take the oath to find out the truth about the rightful owners of the land. The conclusion is that oath taking can be used as a strong weapon to forestall peace in the Niger Delta region.

Further, it was also discovered that cultural festivals is a way of bringing people together from different walks of life as revealed from the FGD carried out. For instance, in Gokana local government area of Rivers state, the Amanikpo festivals is used to bring people together and forestall peace in time of crisis and also instill fear in the people of the community. In Kiangbodo community in Burutu local government area in Delta state, masquerade and onguse dance are used to bring people together during crisis situation while the people of Ekuerede in Warri South local government area have the Oyekoro festival known also as coronation anniversary. It is expected that with the high regards the people have for their king, and the fact that the king's order cannot be disobeyed will ensure peace in the region but the reverse is the case. Hence, (Oziogu, 2011) believes that cultural festival is a periodic celebration by people of a community to commemorate a notable event and a sort of home – coming by the sons and daughters of the soil from various towns and cities of Nigeria and abroad after a long period of separation.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It is clear from the study that effective use of cultural practices will bring peace and development to the region because these practices promote peace, togetherness, love and unity among members and non – members in the communities. The cultural practices used in the region include use of festival, taboo system, oracle consultation and oath taking. It has also be established from the study that festival is used to bring people together and forestall peace in time of crisis and also instill fear in the people of the community while oath taking is used to settle disputes and oracle consultation for truth finding.

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made.

1. Cultural festivals should be rekindled amongst community members. Festival serves as a means of bringing the people together and it will foster peace, love and unity in the community.
2. Awareness campaign should be organized to educate community members on the importance of maintaining peace in the region. The people should be taught that development can only thrive in a peaceful environment. In essence, if people want development, they must maintain peace, law and order in the community.

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