

CULTURE AND THE AMNESTY PROGRAM IN THE NIGER DELTA REGION OF NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this ethnographic study was to examine cultural values, practices, traditions, and beliefs and explore whether they may or may not contribute towards the successful implementation of the amnesty program in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. The goal of this study is to offer evaluative assessment and interpretation of the findings of the research study as indicated by the responses of the participants and observations made. This informed the decision to utilize the qualitative research methods embedded in the ethnographic tradition, which included field notes of observations, in-depth interviews, and review of available documents associated with the amnesty program. The findings of this study have also led to possible solutions and conclusions drawn from the research study. The discussion concludes by offering recommendations for further studies and on related topics or concepts that this study failed to address. Implications for social change include informing policy makers of the importance the culture which may contribute towards the successful implementation of any developmental initiative such as the amnesty program. The conceptual framework which guided the study in providing answers to the research questions was based on Oakley's (1989) concepts of community participation, while Benet's (2013) polarities of democracy provided the theoretical framework for examining the political economy struggle for power and determining if the Urhobo culture offers ways to peacefully resolve that struggle.

Keywords: Amnesty program, community, community participation, community development, culture, development initiative, ex-militants, Niger Delta region, sustainable development.

INTRODUCTION

The Niger Delta region of Nigeria is naturally endowed with enormous gas and oil deposits (Ogege, 2011). Researchers agree that despite the huge oil revenue derived from the region that sustains Nigeria economically, it is still characterized by abject poverty, ecological destruction, polluted environments, impaired health, cultural destabilization, economic impoverishment, exploitation, dearth of serviceable infrastructure, inadequate provision of functional educational system, deprivation, destroyed source of livelihoods, and total neglect of the region by the Federal government of Nigeria (Anele & Omoro, 2012; Badmus, 2010; Idowu, 2012; Ogbodo, 2010; Ogege, 2011; Okpo & Eze, 2012; Paki & Ebienfa, 2011). Decades of exploitative and explorative activities of petroleum resources have had an adverse effect on the host communities in the Niger Delta region (Ogege, 2011). According to Odubo and Tobor (2016), this initial struggle for developmental and environmental justice has metamorphosed into youth militancy with its attendant consequences. The youths in Niger Delta resort to violence in order to attract attention to their views, cries and agitations for social justice, economic equality, and share in the resources of their region. Such violent tendencies include kidnappings, hostage taking, oil bunkering, and attacks on oil installations (Ogege, 2011).

The Niger Delta crisis has assumed a dimension that continues to pose serious concerns to the multinational corporations, the Niger Delta communities, Nigerian government, and the International community. The root causes of this crisis have been the subject of extensive debate. The diversity of views is an indication of the enormous variety of efforts to understand the incessant Niger Delta unrest. A majority of researchers writing on the Niger Delta crisis proffered possible solutions without considering the significance of the culture of the people for whom the program is meant. For example, the studies of Badmus (2010) and Etemike (2012) recommended that the Nigerian government restructure the federal system on a more equitable basis. Idowu (2012) recommended stringent measures against oil companies that fail to adhere to pollution free environment and emphasized the need for the stakeholders to engage in continuous dialogue to forestall cumulated aggression. Akpan and Ering (2010) maintained that the panacea to the Niger Delta crisis is for the federal government of Nigeria to address the social, economic, environmental, and political factors that ignited the crisis. Okpara (2012) recommended a reformed Nigerian constitution that provides an explicit right to a healthy and clean environment as a fundamental human right that is available to every individual. Ogege (2011) recommended a holistic framework that effectively addresses the issue of underdevelopment in the Niger Delta region. Similarly, Kuku (2012) identified empowering the youths as an integral part of the solution to the Niger Delta crisis. The diversity of views failed to take into cognizance the significance of culture of the people of the region when proffering solutions to the incessant unrest and instability of the Niger Delta region. This was what informed the decision to undertake this study. However, researchers agree that the direct result of neglecting the region by the federal government of Nigeria is a reflection of the current crisis that has engulfed the region (Ekpeyong & Dienye, 2010; Etemike, 2012). In agreement with this view, Akpan and Ering (2010) recommended that addressing economic, environmental, social, and political concerns of the Niger Delta people is a likely solution to the crises. While presenting a similar view, Okpara (2012) emphasized that such attempts need to be accompanied by an enabling statute that must provide meaningful redress and penalties for those corporations that fail to abide to environmental policies.

The amnesty program introduced in 2009 by the Late Nigerian President Yar'Adua was a panacea to addressing the unrest and instability in the Niger Delta region. The program resulted in suspending the violence but so far has not resolved the region's problems. If these problems are not addressed, the uprising may resume. According to Tobor (2014), it was for this reason that it became necessary to conduct an ethnographic study of ex-militants from the Urhobo tribe, which comprises the largest number of militants from the Western Niger Delta region. There may be a connection between culture, amnesty program, and its implementation process in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. Torri and Hermann (2011) maintained that the shared values, customs, practices, and belief systems of a community play an important role in enhancing community-based initiatives, particularly those programs that aim to achieve sustainability in the long term. Supporting this view, Akanji and Oyitso (2012) pointed out that any meaningful development initiatives in a given community need to be experiential and people centered (p. 170). In support of this view, Tobor (2014) demonstrated that a developmental initiative such as the amnesty program should be derived from the past socio-political, economic and cultural experiences of the indigenous people and must not be imposed or determined for them by external forces. Okuyade (2011) maintained that culture is a means of exemplifying and expressing indigenous or ethnic identities that has been prevalent since postcolonial Nigeria. According to Okuyade, there is advantage in upholding indigenous culture. An understanding of the Urhobo culture may help provide answers to the research questions of whether there are factors in the Urhobo culture that are particularly

relevant for community participation and environmental protection and whether these factors can contribute towards resolving the persistent crises in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. An understanding of the Urhobo culture may also provide insights to key stakeholders including the federal government and multinational oil corporations to identify how the amnesty program can be better structured to meet the needs of the people of the Niger Delta communities.

METHODOLOGY

The research design for this study is the qualitative method. This method is an ideal interpretive vehicle and thus justified because the study was able to understand, explain, and interpret the actions of a group of people as they engage, encounter, and live through their undisturbed daily-lived experiences. The meanings of these experiences were represented from the perspectives of the research participants. The aim of this study was to keep the text anchored in the world of lived experiences of the Urhobo study participants. This informed the decision to utilize an interpretive ethnographic approach. An ethnographic approach enabled the study to focus on the day-to-day lived experiences, social adaptations, behavior, and other interactions observed amongst the participating ex-militants that were under study. Ethnographic case study was an appropriate methodology through which the issues in this study could be examined and understood. An understanding of the cultural characteristics of the people under study helped to address the key research question of: are there factors in the culture of the Urhobo speaking community that might enhance the successful implementation of the amnesty program in the Niger Delta region?

Data collection process was conducted in a 4 week period. The methods utilized included field notes compositions, observations, journal entries, discussions, and face-to-face interviews and extended conversations with the study participants using open-ended questions. When necessary, follow-up questions were also used to elucidate further details, explain and clarify responses. The time frame for these interviews varied and it was based on each participant's personality as some were more willing to elaborate further than others. The interviews were recorded on a portable digital field audio recorder and subsequently stored on a laptop computer. The interviews were then transcribed verbatim into a Microsoft word document. Efforts were made to reiterate the responses, and the participants were asked to validate the accuracy of the responses. The researcher maintained an appreciable distance between his personal values and those of the participants and refrained from influencing the responses with his own values and bias. Prior permission for the audio recording was granted by each of the participants. This process provided over 14 hours of oral data focusing primarily on participants' views and experiences concerning the amnesty program and perspectives on how the amnesty program affected their lives. Documents about the amnesty program, including its successes and failures were also reviewed. These documents were provided by the Nigeria's Niger Delta Amnesty Office (NDAO). The data analysis technique utilized in this study is content analysis of data. A cohort of 20 ex-militants from the Urhobo speaking tribe within the Niger-Delta region of Nigeria that were enrolled in the amnesty program was used for this study. Over 30, 000 ex-militants have been involved in this program (NDAO, 2014). The snowball strategy and a list of the ex-militants from the Urhobo speaking origin were used as the sampling frame for the study.

Culture as a tool to guide social change efforts

Odubo and Tobor (2016) defined culture as a system of shared basic assumptions, belief systems, behaviors, norms, tradition, values, and way of life that is unique and peculiar to a group of people. Those who implemented the amnesty initiatives failed to take into consideration the significant function of the cultures of the Niger Delta communities. Brennan, Flint, and Luloff (2009) highlighted the importance of culture and noted that far less often is the local culture of an indigenous community afforded a significant role in understanding the community development process (p. 97). Brennan et al. maintained that there appears to be scant empirical researchers who addressed or considered the role of local culture in fostering a more complete understanding of community development or initiating a developmental program. Research findings from Tobor (2014) demonstrated that there is indeed scant empirical research on the strength of culture and its role towards the implementation process of a developmental initiative. Culture continues to be viewed as an outgrowth and as reflecting extant economic and other experiences. This perspective suppresses the role of culture and may have contributed to a total lack of understanding of how the Niger Delta people would respond to the amnesty program. Odubo and Tobor (2016) maintained that the study of culture may provide for the conception of more inclusive and effective policies that integrates both modern and indigenous knowledge systems and practices.

Community participation provides a platform for community empowerment and it encourages the active involvement of the inhabitants of the community also means including the people in decision making processes, involving them in developing, implementing, and evaluating programs and also sharing in the benefits derived from there (Oakley, 1989). Tobor (2014) demonstrate that involving community members in any development initiative is a form of empowering them to take leading roles to address their own peculiar issues, needs, and problems with the support of key stakeholders. This is especially true if that involvement includes the meaningful participation of the youths and elders of that community. Such engagement will result in a more effective management of the participation-representation polarity. For instance, such engagement provides a greater legitimacy to the authority of the developmental initiative. This is consistent with Brennan et al. (2009), who suggested that appreciating the uniqueness of the local culture will have a significant impact on the success of any development initiative. For example, a development project such as the amnesty program can be successful if the community is involved in the planning, development, and implementation phases. Such involvement needs to include key community members such as the elders and representatives of the youths in partnership with key stakeholders such as the federal government and multinational oil corporations. In turn, the meaningful participation of these key stakeholders can lead to an enhanced understanding of their communal obligations.

Another example of successfully managing the participation-representation polarity would be to encourage key stakeholders to assess their roles and explore all possibilities for strengthening existing processes of cooperation, coordination, and collaboration. The amnesty program needs to adopt the concept of community participation as a strategic and tactical approach to foster maximum community support and cooperation throughout its implementation phase. The main objective of participation is to make community-informed decisions. This is consistent with Badmus (2010), who suggested the need for consultations between the oil companies and the oil-bearing communities before the commencement of oil exploratory and exploitative activities. Organizers of the amnesty initiative must be honest

about what the program can achieve in terms of its impact. Key stakeholders engaged in the discussions need to know what the role of local participants will be.

Tobor (2014) indicated that community participation in the amnesty program can help in restoring lasting peace and stability in the region, which is needed to enable sustainable development in the region that also will contribute to more effective management of the diversity-equality polarity. Ogege (2011) asserted that without peace and stability in the Niger Delta region, there can be neither investment nor infrastructural development. Studies such as Bassey (2012) and Nwagboso (2012) lend support to this view and posited that if left unchecked, the spate of security threats could further distort the economy of Nigeria. The amnesty program is one such developmental initiative intended to contribute towards the security stabilization of the region through the demobilization, disarmament, rehabilitation, and sustainable reintegration of the ex-militants.

Ensuring that all community members have access to vital information also contributes to successfully managing the diversity-equality polarity. By ensuring that all members of the community have access to vital information, the needs of the communities can be identified through dialogue between the local communities and the federal government. This in turn will enhance the participation-representation polarity. Badmus (2010) explained that dialogue offers opportunity to members of the communities to share their views, opinions, and thoughts. Idowu (2012) emphasized that the Niger Delta people have a need and desire to engage in dialogue that involves all relevant stakeholders on issues such as resource control, infrastructural development, and justice. For instance, findings from (Tobor, 2014) demonstrated that all the study participants mentioned the need for infrastructural development of the region. Agbonifo (2009) and Amaraegbu (2011) alleged that there is a connection between environmental degradation, perception of injustice, dispossession, and infrastructure development issues that provides the context within which to understand the persistent violence in the Niger Delta region. The federal government through the Ministry of Niger Delta Affairs (MNDA) may be able to address this persistent concern of the region by implementing programs that can enhance infrastructural development in the region. Massive infrastructural development projects will in turn become avenues for employment for those that have been able to successfully complete the amnesty program.

Parrill and Kennedy (2011) emphasized that participation establishes trust through relationship building and open communication. This exercise is needed to systematically and objectively assess progress towards the achievement of desired results or goals. Tobor (2014) suggest that the meaningful involvement of the Urhobo elders will significantly enhance the legitimate authority of the amnesty program and may bridge the divergent views of the study participants. Supporting this view, Salimi et al. (2012) maintained that developmental initiatives that involve active community participation have the potential to make significant differences that will contribute towards positive community changes and need to be encouraged.

Significance of the Study

The findings of the study may contribute to positive social change by providing insights towards developing support programs that may help alleviate the problems and sufferings of the people in the Niger Delta region that result from inequitable distribution of resources. Without such insights, Moruku (2012) argued that it would be difficult to understand the experiences of human rights abuses and exploitation of the Niger Delta people. For example,

decisions that ensure more equitable economic investment on the part of the federal government and multinational oil corporations may likely contribute towards developmental projects for the communities of Niger Delta region. Such developmental projects or support programs may include education and outreach programs that would provide vital information to community members.

The study may also serve to spur key stakeholders such as the federal government, multinational oil corporations, policy makers, and the local communities to re-examine their views and collaborate, cooperate, and coordinate efforts that are geared towards creating policies that will address core reasons for the incessant turmoil and turbulence that have persisted in the Niger Delta region. The findings of the study may bring greater awareness, understanding, and appreciation of those critical issues that have resulted in the persistent crisis in the region; and how gaining greater upsides of participation, equality, and justice may decrease or eliminate this violence. In support of this view, Kamanda et al. (2013) emphasized that community participation enhances the understanding of an issue or problem within the economic, political, social, and cultural context of the community and aims to take action to improve the quality of life and well-being of community members. It is significant to point out that a peaceful Niger-Delta will contribute significantly to the Nigerian economy and to the global oil price.

The themes identified in this study may also serve as a model to help develop policies that would contribute towards the successful implementation of future developmental initiatives. Findings from Tobor (2014) indicated that identified themes such as equality, justice, human rights, and communal obligations are pivotal elements of democracy that may need to be taken into cognizance and thus bring about positive social change. For instance, the federal government agency in charge of the amnesty program and/or the multinational oil corporations may choose to incorporate all or some of the identified themes as part of their strategy or plan for community participatory programs. The identified themes in this study may also contribute to positive social change by enhancing an understanding of the lived experiences of the ex-militants that currently participate in the amnesty initiative. Moruku (2012) explained that studying the experiences of human rights abuses and exploitation of the Niger Delta people provides a platform to better understand their issues and problems. These experiences may be used to develop or enhance policies that may contribute towards the successful implementation and sustainability of the amnesty program in the Niger Delta region.

CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this study was to critically examine the role of the culture as it affects the implementation of the amnesty program. The findings of the study amplified the scholarly, peer reviewed knowledge on the Niger Delta crisis with particular emphasis on the implementation of the amnesty initiative in the Niger Delta region, while focusing on its failures, successes, and potential future prospects. Culture plays a significant role and it is embedded in community participation. Engaging and involving indigenous citizens in the affairs of the communities can lead to increased quality of decisions, access to new information, enhanced fairness, and improved environmental outcomes and legitimacy. In evaluating the credibility of the qualitative data collected, questions were phrased in different forms with similar themes and responses that emerged consistently indicated a logical relationship to each other. The responses from the participants led to more data probing and thus generated new areas of research interest that could be explored in future research.

Findings from this study suggest that African culture is deeply rooted in the values and cultures of their ancestors. Significant findings also revealed that when cultural elements are positively addressed, they could be of benefit and advantageous in contributing towards the successful implementation of a development initiative such as the amnesty program. The failure to take into account the strengths of culture may contribute to an inability to reintegrate ex-militants economically and socially, which may result in both short and long-term impacts. Short-term impacts could be an immediate return of ex-militants to violence or conflict thereby threatening the security and peace of their various communities. Long-term impacts could be that ex-militants would continue to hinder the political, social, and economic development of the nation.

A successful amnesty program requires policy makers, program implementers, and other key stakeholders to draw on the strengths of the culture and adopt community participation as an approach that will more effectively put in place effective and sustainable outreach programs that will inform and educate prospective amnesty participants in particular and members of the Niger Delta communities in general. Such an approach empowers the indigenous people and at the same time equips them with the much needed skills and knowledge that will enhance their understanding of the amnesty program and the process. It is imperative to conduct additional research to better understand the impact of culture on development initiatives in any community. Development initiatives are likely to succeed if the culture of the people for whom the program is meant is taken into cognizance. A study population that is limited only to the Urhobo speaking people may not naturally reflect the opinions and views of the other tribes such as the Ijaws, Ibibios, Kalabari, Ishekiris, Efiks, Isoko, Nembe, Ndom, Andoni, and Ikwerre. Further study is therefore recommended that will include participants from these other ethnic groups that represent the entire people of the Niger Delta region.

About the Author

John Oghenero Tobor has a PhD degree in Public Policy and Administration with Specialization in Terrorism Mediation and Peace. He is an educator/researcher/activist/security consultant who focuses on social change initiatives. He has written and published several research articles. He has a vast experience in community organizing, community development, social economy entrepreneurship, and fostering collaborative community partnerships. He is the founder and chief executive officer of worldwide security consultants Ltd and Move Nigeria Forward Initiative - a nongovernmental and non-profit organization based in Nigeria and in the United States of America. He is a member of the Institute for Association for Counterterrorism & Security Professionals, American Society for Public Administration, American Society for Industrial Security, and Foreign Policy Association of Harrisburg.

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