

International Journal of Arts and Humanities (IJAH)
Bahir Dar- Ethiopia

Vol. 5(3), S/No 18, June, 2016:161-178

ISSN: 2225-8590 (Print) ISSN 2227-5452 (Online)

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4314/ijah.v5i3.14>

**From Colonialism to Neo-colonialism, Christianity in Cultural
Demythologization and Ecological Crises in the Niger Delta,
Nigeria**

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Abstract

The ecological crises in the Niger Delta area of Nigeria is not unconnected to several factors, ranging from degradation and pollution; induced as a result of trade with Europe and eventual commercialization of the area by western countries. But all these were not to be if not for the demythologization of the traditional ecological myths through western Christianity. The active role of the missionaries made them accomplices in opening-up of the area to subsequent ecological crises. The paper therefore, aims to establish the argument that the demythologization of the myths that preserve the Niger Delta environment preceded and gave the way for ecological crises that are prevalent in Niger Delta area. The trend of the demythologization observed from the colonial to neo-colonial period, is therefore, instructive in the search for solution for the ecological crises in the Niger Delta area. Findings further shows that the myths were more effective than the government laws and policies on the protection of the environment, and that Christianity has found a replacement for these myths. Using both literal criticism approach the paper suggest a replacement of the myths by a combination of government and Christian efforts being a dominant religion in the area.

Key words: Colonialism, Christianity, Demythologization, Ecological Crises, Neo-colonialism.

Introduction

Myths generally captures various subjects such as history, religion, cosmogony, nature, ethics, and the world views of diverse communities. They also serve as media of transmitting them from one generation to another. The gradual erosion of these myths by western education and European Christianity began with imperialistic agenda which began from colonialism and continued with neo-colonization in Africa. One of the major aftermaths of this apparent demythologization is the current spate of ecological crises that is well pronounced in the Niger Delta area of Nigeria.

The preponderance of western education has nearly swept away memories of several myths that connect Africans to their natural environment. With biological science theories such as symbiosis, commensalism, and parasitism were myths of African set to be demythologized. But these scientific theories on the long run have failed to prevent the world from the unabated cataclysmic ecological crises such as climate change. Not even the seeming realities of the scientific simulated predictions on climate change has influenced humans' attitudes towards saving their environment. Apparently, the modern science's explanation of human nature in relation to the environment from materialistic point of view could not resolve its ecological challenges

Interestingly, myths capable of regulating the exploration of the environment in the Niger Delta survived but only in some few villages (Yengizifa, 2009). The impacts of these mythical ecological regulations which predated colonialism in Nigeria are now old fashioned. These were the myths applied by the precolonial indigenes of Niger Delta in form of taboos. Enforcement were by invocations of various divinities to punish offenders because of the inevitable need of preserving the environment (Yengizifa, 2009). Unfortunately, with the advent of colonialism, those taboos and their enforcements gradually waned, thanks to the Christianization of the Niger Delta people by European missionaries. This was the beginning of demythologization of the environmental-care myths; but this rose to its peak with the advent of neo-colonialism (Asuka, 2010). This paper therefore, argues that the demythologization of African cultural environmental myths is the genesis of ecological crises in the Niger Delta, and its modified replacement is inexcusable to restore the ecology of the area.

Conceptual Definitions

Culture

Culture is "the sum total of knowledge, habits, attitudes and other variables shared and transmitted by members of a particular society" (Linton as cited in Oshitelu,

2007, p.113). It includes “knowledge, custom, beliefs, values, morals, arts as well as abilities acquired by man as a member of his community” (Tylor, 1871). Nevertheless, the elements which made up culture are dependent on what people call their culture; hence, culture can expand to include or exclude certain elements over years. Therefore, “the culture of a community or society is the sum total of the material and intellectual equipment by which they satisfy their biological and social needs” (Paddington as cited in Oshitelu, 2007, p. 113).

Culture is also a product of cognitive, emotive and psycho-motive activities that inform the behavioural patterns upon which human interactions are guided in a community. “A people’s culture includes their beliefs, rules of behaviour, language, rituals, art, and technology, styles of dress, ways of producing and cooking food, religion, and political and economic systems” (Bodley, 2009). As a result, culture determines the distinctiveness of one group of people to the other, and the relationship of humans to other living things and non-living things.

Kukah (2007) further describes culture as a “tool kit of identities for our survival; its component units are a common world view, a myth of common ancestry and identity, ethos and a set of rituals which give rhythm to life” (p.11). Thus, to erode a people of their culture is to sap them of their survival abilities, expose them to dangers and open them up to exploitative schemes (Kukah, 2007). This paper therefore, defines culture as the philosophy of life that forms the basis of any society and stands as their identity. This is coded in their language, worship, myths, proverbs, axioms, creativity, fashion, arts, science, technology, politics, environment and such others.

Myths and Demythologization

“Myths are distinguished from other commonly collected narratives such as folktales and legends”; they are “stories of ancient times believed to be true” (Magoulick, n.d). It is defined by Bascon (1965) as, “tales believed as true, usually sacred, set in the distant past or other worlds or parts of the world, and with extra-human, inhuman, or heroic characters” (p.6). Not surprisingly, Grims and Grims, (1987) affirm that “divinities form the core of all mythology” (p.203).

Hansen (1998) argues that the religious dimension in the definitions of myth was a later development, giving instance of non-religious context of Greek mythologies. But this argument appears weak, owing to the fact that there is no evidence that the non- religious Greek myths predated other religious cultural mythologies. Therefore, tracing the definition of myth to the Greek cultural background, where non-religious myths survived lacks validity. In this light, Malinowski (1992) a foremost anthropologist, further asserts that myths cannot be any less religious and it is an instrument to direct social actions in a community. Little wonder, Mbiti (1975) strongly avows that “African Religion is found in myths and

legends” (p.26); and this religion was the only life and style of the people before the advent of Christianity, Islam and others in Africa. In the same vein, Idowu (1996) in his observation of Yoruba people of West Africa, comments that “religion... finds vehicles in myths” (p.5).

Shcremp (as cited in Magolick, n.d.) rather comments that:

Myth" refers to colorful stories that tell about the origins of humans and the cosmos. Attitudes towards myth vary greatly. Some regard it as a source of spiritual growth, while others see only falsehood. Some see in myth the distinct character of particular cultures, while others see universal patterns. Some regard myth as "contemporary" and "alive", while others think of it as "ancient" and/or "dead.

Remarkably, in Africa, myths are not merely fictitious stories, they are fictionally factual. The fictions in which they are encapsulated is to make them attractable, retainable and understandable to younger generations but yet they contain what they believed as true. Little wonder, Idowu (1996) comments that myths among Africans are “answers to questions posed to man by the very facts of his confrontation with the physical universe and his awareness of a world, which though unseen, is yet sufficiently palpable to him” (p.7) He further opines that:

in the myths, therefore, we have stories ranging from simple explanations of common occurrences related to the fact of human existence, to answers to serious riddles...questions with reference to the Deity, the whence and wherefore of the unseen world in which man feels himself enveloped, which rules, guides, or molest him. The myths thus, serve the manifold purpose of statements of doctrinal beliefs, confirmation of faith in the mind, liturgical credo, simple metaphysics, and the provision of something ready to say ‘when thy son [asketh] thee in time to come. What is this? (p.7)

Therefore, while myths might be regarded as false stories to some scientific inclined westerners; for a number Africans, they are alive and living.

Magolick (n.d) also observes that myth has some supernatural features positioning it against scientific thinking. These myths were able to hold the Niger Delta people and their environment together in the pre-colonial era in Africa long before the advent of western science and technology. Perhaps their reinvention in the modern society faced with environmental degradation and climate change will complement the scientific efforts to end the looming global ecological crisis.

On the other hand, demythologization as a term simply connotes, to reveal and understand the true character, nature, or meaning of something by ridding it of all mythical or mysterious aspects (Encarta Dictionary, 2009). To demythologize also

means “to remove mythology from (especially the Bible or a religious statement) in order to reach or present the basic meaning” Chambers Dictionary, 1996). Nevertheless, to draw more historical illustration for the concept of demythologization in relation to Bible or religious statement, as inferred from Chambers Dictionary, its earlier theological application by Rudolf Karl Bultmann (1884-1976) is worth being recalled.

Bultmann in his existentialist opinion, applied the demythologization to the hermeneutics of the Christian Bible in the light of changing society by modern technology. Thus, he suggested that preachers as well as scholars should strip the New Testament Bible of all the myths in it (Wikipedia, 2012). Cross (2005) opines that Bultmann’s position was that the “kerygma” (teachings) of Jesus only should be believed as the truth of the New Testament; and stories of the miraculous, angels, resurrection and others which to him cannot be scientifically proven should be discarded. In other words, a reader of the New Testament Bible should regard the red letters prints common with King James Version of the Bible as the kernel of truth, and all others as myths. If demythologization as proposed by Bultmann is accepted, the Bible may not be weightier than a foolscap.

However, what Rudolf Bultmann called myths in the New Testament were happenings, testimonies of historical facts and contexts of Christian Bible. They were things that happened around Jesus’s *kerygma* taught. Hence, to redefine Bultmann’s demythologization, it is stripping the truths of its valid grounds, comprising testimonies of historical events. Thus, demythologization in a way is not only to uncover the actual nature of truth or an attempt to reveal actual meaning by removing mythology; it is in its complexity, a way of stripping truth of its attraction and valid testimonies that adheres believers to it.

As myths about the environment in the Niger Delta are demythologized, the people became demoralised to care and protect it from being abused. Myths in the context of this paper therefore, are ancient beliefs and conceptualisations about human existence in relation to other existences, which keeps both humans and non-humans under necessary checks; in order to maintain balance and harmony, in the community of living and non-living; both within and beyond physical existence. Where these myths appear as regulations such as in the case of preserving ecological balance, the deities are often invoked by the ancient precolonial period to punish offenders. Therefore, to demythologize in this context is to remove the force behind the understanding, appreciation and faith in social and common law, meant to maintain social and environmental balance and harmony.

Ecological Crisis

Ecological crisis occurs “when the environment of a species or a population changes in a way that destabilizes its continued survival” (Wikipedia, 2012). The word

“population” in this definition above covers all that exist in an environment both living and non-living. The environmental variations leading to destabilization of sustained survival are caused by factors including degradation which are aftermaths of erosion and pollution.

Again, ecological crisis depicts a problem situation in the environment that surrounds both human and non-human population. Haluzan (2009) observes that the term "ecological problems" is today mostly used to describe different environmental problems". Notwithstanding, “the problems of environment are also problems of ecology because the environment is really a centre of all ecological research... climate change, all sorts of pollution, deforestation, endangered animals, these are all ecological problems”. Thus, ecological crisis is defined in this paper, as environmental problems emanating from ecological abuses by humans, and also induced by both natural activities which threatens human existence.

Myths and Ecological Preservation in the Niger Delta

Cultures in various human communities have found myths as media to pass on beliefs, values, norms and traditions. Thus, there are myths about many things owing to the experiences of the people. At times, the myths are redacted, modified and codified as necessary to ensure its uniqueness to a particular community. This section of the paper aims at showing historical evidences that the pre-colonial Niger Delta as exemplified in the Ijaw and Urhobo people possessed environmental laws. They maintained the ecological balance of the rich mangrove through the god -- the police and judge of those who breach environmental laws.

The *Ijaw*, (*Ijon* or *Izon*) and the *Urhobo* have their cosmologic myths about creation. The *Urhobo* believes that *Oghene* was the creator of the world. On the other hand, the *Ijaw* in their earliest past, believed in the female concept of the creator God called “*Woyengi* or *Temeáráú*- ‘The She Who Creates’” (Asuka, 2010, p.12). Remarkably, with the advent of Christianity, this world view of the Female-Creator-God changed to the male concept- “*Nanaowei* (the man who owns), or *Wodau* (our father) and *Temeowei* (the man who creates)” (Asuka, 2010, p. 19).

The *Ijon* and *Urhobo* people also believe in the existence of other supernatural personalities besides the Creator-God, which include the ancestors, spirits, deities and gods (Asuka, 2010). He further argues that these gods and goddesses are the fallen angels and there is an apparent unity between the Creator God and these gods and goddesses. Alluding to the gods and goddess as falling is however, controversial, and it obviously has implications for some erroneous concept about myths. These gods and the spirits of the ancestors were also known to inhabit “the forest, rivers, creeks, lakes, ocean and sea” (Asuka, 2010, p. 13). Nevertheless, these divinities were highly

reverenced, that they often say ‘the fear of the gods and the spirits of the dead ancestors is the beginning of wisdom’.

In centuries past, the gods were the custodians of the natural environment in the Niger Delta. According to Tonukari (n.d), “to traditional Urhobo, the community is basically sacred rather than being secular, and is surrounded by several religious forms and symbols”. He also notes that Urhobo has over 1,260 deities, and the Ijona believe that the gods have their dwellings in the natural environment. He further comments that:

There are gods for vegetation, gods for weather, gods for nature, gods for geographical areas, gods in the aerial planes, gods for villages, gods for the house, gods in the temples, gods in running water, gods in deepest forest and in mountain heights. In an archetypical Urhobo traditional setting, there is no situation, environment and place that the Urhobo does not have a god for. Gods inspire, gods infuse art and creativity and gods provoke destruction too.

Aziza for instance was the king of the forest for the Urhobo people; a god who controls and governs the forest. He was perceived in diverse wind-like activities and there were even claims that he was seen by some Urhobos with their naked eyes (Tonukari, n.d.). This jealous and troubleshooting god, who could sometimes be benevolent to women, often love to scare people going to forest-farm on the eve of market days, to control abuses of farm land and hunting of animals. He would mimic sounds, fell branches of big trees to scare people away from the forest, until they lament at the happening. *Aziza* feels happy when they express grief, because to him, that was their acceptance of his kingship in the forest, if people in the farm did not cry out, he would do worst things to make them leave the farm.

Yengizifa (2009) also narrated the story of *Opouogula*, a goddess associated with the *Opouogula* Lake, opposite Ikibiri sand back. Ikibiri was a home of fishes, crocodiles and pythons before it went dry as a result of over-fishing. Fishing in the lake was controlled by the *Opouogula* priest in order to regulate the ecosystem. However, the need to end the premature death of the priests, which was always 7years into their priesthood, the oracle recommended a continuous fishing of the lake for 7years until there was no more fish.

These stories suggested that the consciousness of environmental care and control was not only built into the traditional environment laws of the Niger Delta people; but in their very psychology through their indigenous religion. This religion has the gods as the police and judges of the offenders of their environmental laws. It is apparent that the older generations of the Niger Delta people shared their daily lives

with the gods, through whose helps they attain sustainable environment. The song of Ebizimor (as cited in Asuka, 2010) captures the need for this control among the people:

Listen to me carefully, do not be deceived by the flatness of the earth's surface to walk on it carelessly. The types of pits on the earth's surface are such that even three long poles put together cannot touch their bottoms...Do not be deceived by the wideness of the earth's surface to walk about it carelessly. Do not be deceived by the sweetness of water to drink it without control. Do not be deceived by the sweetness of honey to lick it carelessly (p.23).

“The protection of plant species on groves or their planting on grounds of sacredness could be considered a more advanced stage in the evolution of Urhobo religion” (Tonukari, n.d.). Therefore, sacred forests at times called evil forest by non-initiates were rather protected areas, where special species of animals and plants were deliberately left alone; perhaps because they are endangered species or that they are more important for other things (medical use) than food.

Interestingly, the protection of endangered animals and plants in the Niger Delta area predated colonialism. It is documented that Bonny and Brass used to demand penalties of heavy fines or slavery for disturbing or harassing totem animals such as pythons and monitoring lizards; which they believed, were helpful in increasing the depth of lakes and rivers, and in turn enhance fertility of fishes (Burns, 1972). It was reported that, two British sea men of Liverpool ship who killed a guana at Bonny were fined 700 bars (£175) only after a death judgment was placated by a bribe through their Captain (Burns, 1972). Unfortunately, the Captain was not ready to part away with such large sum of money, and so left the subjects behind to serve jail terms with hard labour.

The Niger Delta people were said to possess “intricate knowledge of their environment” before colonization (Falola & Paddock, 2011, p. 256). The knowledge is captured in the myths, which they passed on from one generation to another. They ensured the protection of the environment with the help of the gods who policed and judged the offenders irrespective of tribe and complexion. It is apparent from the foregoing that the ecological crises observed in the Niger Delta today is not traceable to the pre-colonial period.

Colonization, Christianity and Demythologization in Niger Delta

The demythologization of environmental myths began with the inroad of western Christianity and colonization of the Niger Delta. This section of the paper argues that colonialism, through western Christianity, began the process of demythologizing of the cultural myths, which had sustained the ecological balance in the pre-colonial Niger Delta area before their arrival. Hence, the argument is sustained

that colonialism and western Christianity provided the frame work for environmental crises which the area suffers today.

Undoubtedly, colonialism exploited the Niger Delta people “culturally and socially, making a shipwreck of them economically and deforested them of energetic man-power, while the missionaries created a vacuum in their religiosity, leaving them in an unbridgeable void between the earth and the sky” (Isichei, 1995, p.73). This appears to be the similar fate of all colonized cities in Africa.

Asuka, (2010) further observes that, the interactions of the *Ijaw* with the Western traders, missionaries and colonialists were to the bastardization of their native religion and its prohibitions. He further opines that “the *Ijaw* had been very spiritual as their prohibitions before the coming of Christianity show” (p.10). Nevertheless, the colonial interests in trade and missionary activities in Niger Delta derided the native belief. Also, since missionaries find the colonial government’s protection in the region non-negotiable; their support to encourage the exploitation of the area became imperative. This was further expressed in the Article, VII of the Treaty with Opobo, 1884 (Jaja, 1991, p.40).

Ayandele, (1966) comments that “Africans saw the White man’s ‘invasion’ of Nigeria in the spectacles of missionary enterprise...The British ‘invasion’ also came to be seen in terms of culture” (p.242). Gradually, the erosion of the myths that sustained the eco-system in places like *Ijaw*, *Urhobo*, *Warri* and others paved way for the colonial exploration of natural resources in the area. In the words of Falola and Paddock, (2011) “the British strategy was to export as many extractive and agricultural goods as possible for sale on the international market” (p.245).

Apparently, the spirituality attached to Niger Delta Rivers under the care of the water goddess such as the *Olokun* or *Onoku*; the sacred forests under the cares of gods like *Aziza* were not to the colonialist any reason to hesitate exploitation. Rather, the goddesses were simply regarded as creatures of unnecessary over-bloated eco-spiritual appellations. They therefore, encouraged the demythologization of the Niger Delta myths about the gods and their prohibitions on the use of the environmental resources. These were evidenced in the evangelical missionary reorientation of the people in the Niger Delta region. Not surprisingly, the gods and goddess were alluded to as fallen angels, which the Christian Bible regarded as demons. Once this was established to cast aspersion on their native religion, the door was open for exploration of their forests and seas. Tonukari, (n.d) observes that,

Having destroyed belief in, and fear of, the wrath of the gods and the ancestors through the Christian faith's insistence that such gods do not exist nor possess any powers; Christianity creates doubts, confusion and vacuum in the minds of the people (para. 10).

As the people were said to be liberated from the bondage of the gods called “the fallen Angels” (Asuka, 2010); through the gospel of the Christian missionaries; the myths that had preserved the environment were gradually removed without substitution. Consequently, the European traders received the nod of the communities to fell down the tall and heavy trees of *Aziza* for urbanization and trade (Tunakori, n.d). Since the traditional chiefs were taken care of by giving them gin, gunpowder, fringe of trade benefits and protection from colonial artilleries; the environment did not really matter (Jaja, 1991, p. 40). But where the people choose to protest, obviously not often because of the desecration but for compensation, they and their chiefs were ridiculed by the colonial soldiers.

Invariably, the delta region became the theatre of ferocious attempts to coerce, subdue and dominate the local groups. By the 1850s, much of the initial scepticisms about the cost and the benefit of greater insertion into participation in the affairs of the delta disappeared among colonial officials replaced by a growing recognition that having a foothold in the delta was pivotal to the pursuit of British imperial ambition in that part of Africa. From then onward, increased consular presence began to confront and subdue, often with a fight, coastal potentates whose activities were deemed “inimical” and “subversive.” The dawn of what turned out to be one of the most frightening eras of British gunboats commenced in full throttle. (Ukeje, 2011, p. 191)

Hence, the land and the waters were not only polluted by the technology brought by the colonialists, they were desecrated for deified gods. Demythologization of the myths that protected the Niger Delta ecology during colonization establishes a complicity of the European missionary in the duplicity that was targeted towards extortion of the environmental resources by colonial Government. The approach was simple, the European missionaries exploited the minds of the people for the colonialist to extort their land and waters for England. Thus, “the heart is the Lords’ and the earth for Her Majesty”.

Neocolonialism and Demythologization in Niger Delta

Neo-colonialism is simply an indirect system of dominating the economy of the former colonies through the principles of the free market economic system. Thus, it is an improvement on the colonial intrigues used to exploit the former colonies’ natural resources among which is Niger Delta area of Nigeria. This section therefore, argues that neo colonization is a sophisticated and complex tool of demythologization, perfected during colonialism to further exploit natural resources, and which is today, worsening ecological crises in the Niger Delta area.

The fact that free market economy system or free trade was the actual goal of the European traders in their earlier contact with the Niger Delta people was apparent. It appears that failure to achieve this goal at the initial contact with Niger Delta, birthed

colonialism as temporal make shift. In addition, lack of a comprehensive knowledge of the Niger Delta terrain, and personalities like Jaja of Opobo, made the coveted free trade tacitly mentioned in Article IV of the Protectorate, which states that “the subjects and citizens of all countries may freely carry on trade in every part of the territories of the Kings and Chiefs parties hereto, and may have houses and factories therein,” unsuccessful (Jaja, 1991, p. 42). It is worthy of note that the free trade included in the Treaty with Niger Delta people was opposed by Opobo (Jaja, 1991, p. 25).

The perceived cost of colonization considered by some scholars to be a huge loss to Britain is rather a cheap investment into neo-colonialism. Undoubtedly, neo-colonialism has brought huge profit to Europe through companies like Royal Dutch Oil in Nigeria; but at the colossal loss of ecological balance and environmental sustainability in the Niger Delta area. Colonialism therefore, should be seen as an option taken when free trade was initially opposed by some communities in the sub-Saharan Africa.

The Niger Delta of Nigeria is presently home to several multinational companies in Nigeria such as Shell, Chevron, Mobil, Elf, Agip, Total, Daewoo, and many others. The sites of these companies always cover large expanses of land area, which formerly include forest farmland of palm trees and other invaluable plants and animals (Omagu, 2011). The oil companies also claim the right of way for their ever long pipelines that cut across farm lands and rivers; and by so doing, the people are deprived of lands for farming, in a country where agriculture is the main employment of the larger percentage of labour, and contributes immensely to the GDP (Omagu, 2011). Hence, the myths that govern such farmlands and rivers became useless and the gods that govern them either fled or became acquired properties of the foreign owners.

Reflectively, a dirge for the Niger Delta myths that protect the environment in the pre-colonial period is inexcusable: the goddesses in the rivers and oceans appeared to have failed to resist the science and technology of the West; the gods of the forest fallen with the fell trees or relocated for the fear of the uncompromising bulldozers. Or they left so much in haste, leaving the land with pockets of terrible erosions. The deities of the rocks must have fled for the fear of dynamites, and left the resistance to flood for mere sandbags. The soil soon became passage for the angered goddesses of rivers and oceans who struggled with the annoying droplets of chemicals; whose abode beneath were often damaged for off-shore exploration towers made of iron beams; and in the bid to escape to other locations, the mighty floods that ravaged and ransacked the farms and houses of their once loyal adherents were provoked.

Again, one could guess, that the gods of the sky have been so choked with smoke from gas flaring, that their tears became blackish rain; staining and contaminating everything under them; their tears, once cool and refreshing became poisonous and dangerous to human health, vegetation and fishes not excluded. Even

periwinkles and other shell fishes could no more live in the waters. The deities of the earth received the tears of the ones in the skies to yield poor harvest to the people, for they were left with no choice. The cries of the gods of the sky are of thunderous agony, which shatters roofs. The breeze, the messenger from the gods of the air do not just come with harshness, but skin diseases and cancers. Oh the gods of the sky suffered so much, that they coughed out respiratory diseases to their once beloved people!

Then which pythons would stand the gods of fiery fire often inflamed by the provocation of oil leakage of carelessly laid and never maintained pipelines? What were totem animals and fishes when it burns with anger by the smashing of the illegal oil tappers? Oh the plants suffered and lost their values when the gods of fires busted for lack of control as their cognomen; burn until no more to burn! Will the monitor lizard out run the gods of fires, ah no! Even squirrels would only escape with their tails burnt.

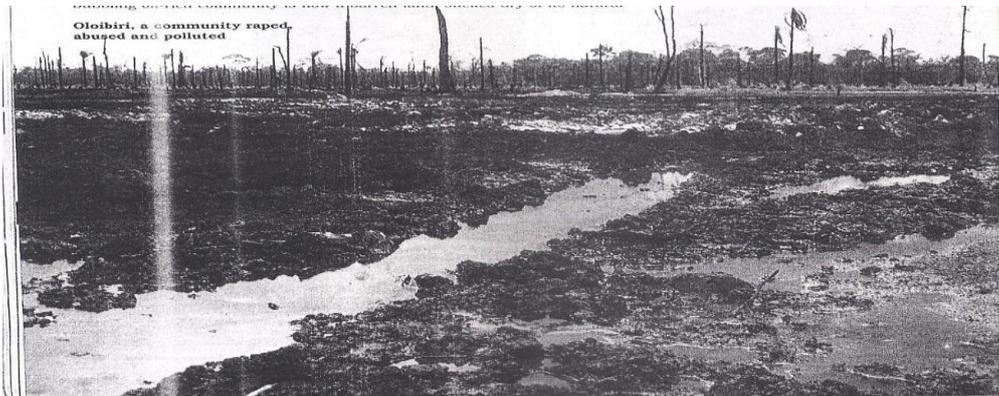
The fishes fled to escape when oils come to the waters, for their touch is worse than the hurt of a hook. When the oil comes to swim in the rivers, the waters obey to keep them afloat. They denied the air from visiting the abode of the water goddess, when her labour pains needed cool relief from the gods of breeze; the underwater were darkened, for the black gold shine and smiles afloat to the sky, to distract the rays of the Sun-god. The crocodiles were terrified at their shadow, and fled to escape on nearby land; the fishes that waited had their last breath; the ones that escaped, their smooth skin became as stained like leopard. Who then could have waited, when even the mermaids dared not?

The multinational oil companies have proven beyond doubts that indeed, science and technology has no respect for the once sacred abodes of the gods' and goddesses'. However, the question to ask is that, were the myths meant to protect the environment for the goods of the gods or the betterment of humanity? It is very lucid, that if indeed the gods suffers at all, the humans are the one to bear the brunt of it all. The ecological crises in the Niger Delta have clearly shown a suffering masses, and if the gods and goddesses would never resurrect or return, the people are more "pitiable among all men"!

The effective use of the modern technology by the multinational oil companies have naked the abode of the gods. In this wise, Lyn White (1966) could be adjudged right to have blamed Western Christianity for the ecological crises in the light of its intercourse with western science and technology to exploit the world of the gods for Europe's wealth. The Niger Delta therefore, is one of such places where the dominance theory of Genesis 1: 26 of "subduing" the natural environment is in an anti-steward manner. In 1991 and 1994, the World Bank assessments measures 2,300 cubic meters of crude oil in 300 separate incidents" spilled into Bayelsa and Rivers States (Omagu, 2011, p. 112). The degradation of the environment that begun since the discovery of

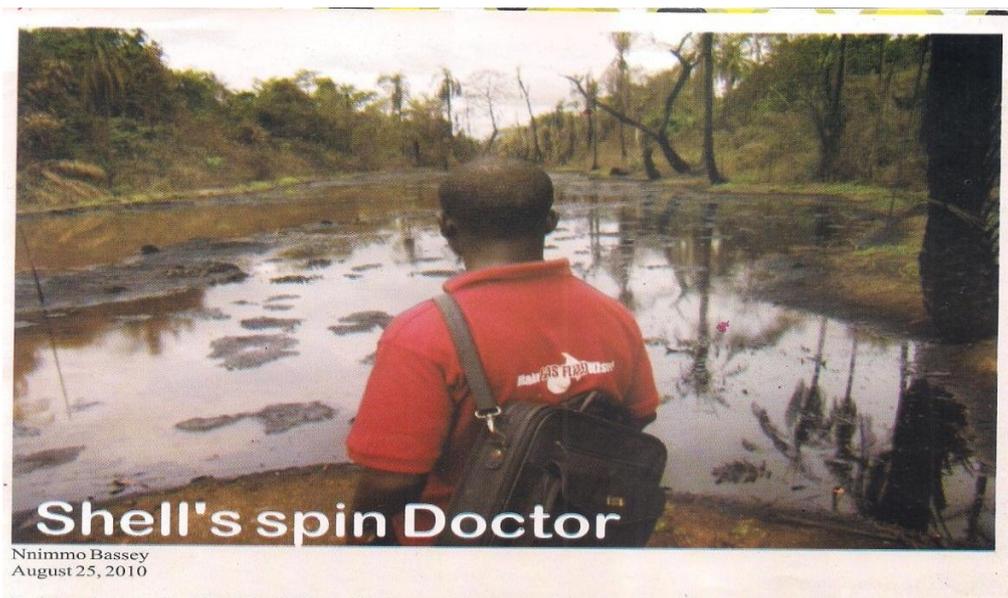
oil at Oloibiri, Bayelsa State between 1953 and 1957 left the ecology of the area in chaos.

Fig. 1: Picture of ecological devastation due to oil spillage at Oloibiri, Bayelsa State.



Source: Ero, (2008:54). (This magnitude of ecological devastation at Oloibiri remain like that till October, 2012 when surveyed by the Researcher

Fig. 2. Picture of oil spillage at Rumuekpe.



Source; Bassey, (2005, August, 25 as cited in Onoyume 2008, November).

It is reported that some water goddesses (mermaids) found in River Nun during roads and bridge constructions were captured away by foreign engineers (Yengizifa, 2009). Traditionally, such mermaids should have been placated by the natives in order to relocate to another domain (Yengizifa, 2009). The myths about the goddesses of waters called mermaid is that they ensure large fishes in the rivers. Hence, taking them out of the environment of Niger Delta is a colossal loss to the ecology and economy of the area which also depend largely on fishing as means livelihood.

The myths preserving the mermaids have been bastardised by increasing Christian (there is a common reference to it as an evil spirit that possess females with spirit of promiscuity and prostitution, and also gave them spirit husband in the marine world) of the Niger Delta people. Asuka (2010) opines that the large percentage of the people regarded these gods and goddesses as fallen angels and demons which were agents of the Devil. Consequently, whatever happens to them by way of environmental exploitation receives no sympathy from Christian population who now dominated the region. Hence, Christians' preponderance in the Niger Delta area indicates the high level of demythologization of precolonial environmental myths of the area.

If truly these gods and goddesses are demons and evil as claimed by Christians (who promotes deliverance from "ancestral spirits", "water spirits" and mermaids) the question is, what substitution for the myths have Christianity? Again, to what extent has the Church invoke the name of God to prevent the environmental degradation, when what are obvious are unfriendly ecological edifices for church worship? This is a real challenge to Christianity, that despite her claims, militants and kidnappers were bred as a result of ecological crisis in the area. Christianity thus, has the duty to substitute these old myths in order to read the scripture with the right sense of stewardship that though "the earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof" (Ps 24:1); it is our responsibility to work it and to care of it (Genesis 2: 15b).

Modern Environmental Laws versus Traditional Laws In Niger Delta

Several environmental programmes, laws and agencies have been applied to control the increasing rate of environmental degradation, in the Niger Delta area by the government of several governments in Nigeria. These include the Federal Environmental Protection Agency, whose activities begun in 1998; but which has not been successful in Niger Delta. There have been more and several oil spillages in the Niger Delta area since 1999. Till date, the gas flaring remains as usual and these further worsens the ecological balance of the area.

Other laws enacted to save the state ecological imbalance are the natural resources conservation act 1989; the environmental impact assessment act (no 86 of 1992) and endangered species (control of international trade and traffic) act 11 of 1985.

But the fact is that these laws only appear as good policies, with little or no substantial achievement to show for them.

Mmom (2010) presents a result showing that the environmental myths associated with gods and goddesses have in a great measure preserved the ecological balance in the Niger Delta. The table below contain responses collected from five “riverine communities *Abalama, Ido, Okirika, Ifoko and Abuloma* in Rivers State; and other five riverine “*Koko, Patani, Okerenkoko, Otuanana and Egbokodo*” in Delta State (Mmom, 2010)

Table I: Traditional Management/Conservation practices and their level of efficacy

	Very Effective (%)	To Certain Extent (%)	Not Effective (%)	Neutral (%)
Sacred forest/ grooves.	180 (90)	16 (8)	4 (2)	-
Sacred animals/ fish.	172 (86)	22 (11)	-	6 (3)
Selective harvest.	55 (27.5)	10 (5)	131(65.5)	4 (2)
Community preserved forest.	58 (29)	76 (38)	54 (27)	12 (6)
Periodic Restrictions/ laws	136 (68)	16 (8)	46 (23)	2 (1)
A forestation	17 (8.5)	-	184 (96)	12 (6)

Source: Mmon, (2007/2010).

It obvious from table I. above that the myths of sacredness tied to the gods and goddesses have successfully sustained the ecological balance in few areas where they are retained, because the people have a strong respect for their native religion. Mmon (2010) also opines that:

When conservation efforts are imposed on the people, they feel excluded and have no sense of stewardship. It is easier for the defaulters to be handled in traditional practices than in formal conservation approach. In fact, conservation approach as forest reserve is usually alien to the people and they feel the practice is for the benefit of the government rather than theirs. (p. 33)

Hence, the modern environmental laws which enforcement lies with punishment of payment of fines can nowhere compare with the environmental myths enforced by the gods; even where fines were demanded. The question arising from the foregoing is, should we return to these old myths or invent a Christian version? Perhaps, the government would rise to the occasion to enact laws with enforcement as effective as that of the gods and goddesses; in order to save the Niger Delta further environmental degradation and global warming.

Conclusion

The fact that colonialism and European missionary demythologize the sacred beliefs that once sustained the ecological balance in the Niger Delta cannot be overlooked in the ongoing ecological crises in the area. The continuation of this phenomenon during neo-colonialism is a serious challenge that must be tackled. Unfortunately, neither the Church which represents the missionary nor the multinational oil companies which represent the then colonial government are anywhere in the vanguard to protecting the Niger Delta environment. To the Church, the old myths were devil's deceits, to the oil companies, a hindrance to oil wealth, and to the National government, a bottle neck to national revenue.

Attempts to replace the myths with modern environmental laws have not helped the situation so far; especially, with the apparent ecological plights to which lip service has been paid over the years. In addition, the Nigeria churches have not considered eco-theology, a serious gospel to preach and so they only could console the people with the coming Kingdom. The implication therefore, is the damaging effects of ecological crises such as kidnapping and militancy which the morality of the Church has failed to challenge. Thus, it is imperative for the government, the church and the people to resolve on a new myth.

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