

**The Medium of Theatre as an Alternative
Conflict Resolution Mechanism:
A Case for the Niger Delta**

Ogu-Raphael Ifeanyi

Department of Theatre Arts
Delta State University, Abraka
Delta State, Nigeria

Abstract

One of the major problems facing Nigeria and indeed, Africa is intra and inter-ethnic conflicts. The conflicts in some of these nations have, in very recent times degenerated into serious violence, a number of which have developed into intractable armed struggle. These situations have, to a large extent threatened the corporate existence of many African states, especially against the backdrop of the divergent cultures of the various ethnic nationalities; Rwanda, Congo Democratic Republic, Sudan and Somalia to mention some of them. And the Niger Delta question in Nigeria is one that has remained a vexed area for which no answer seems to be sufficient. What therefore, is the way forward? It is in line with the various attempts in the past that this essay proposes the theatrical approach.

Introduction

In Nigeria ethnic conflicts have contributed to the social and political dislocation of the Nigerian society. This situation has often led to stagnation in social and economic growth of the country. Of late, the seeming intractable conflict in the Niger Delta has assumed a much dangerous dimension resulting in the wanton destruction of state properties and loss of lives and private properties of inestimable value. There has been reported cases of armed militia groups that have taken root in the creeks of Niger Delta, particularly in Rivers, Bayelsa and Delta States, whose activities ranges from bunkering, through piracy to kidnapping and

Ogu-Raphael Ifeanyi

blowing up of oil installations. All these have caused irreparable damage and loss to the Nigerian state. What for instance, is the reason for some of these conflicts?

A number of factors may have contributed to the conflict situation in the Niger Delta: anger, hatred, greed, lust jealousy, selfish ambition and break breakdown in communication etc. These according to Iyorwuese Hagher (1997:14), are some of the reasons responsible for the conflict in most countries. While this may be true to some degree, on a global level he contends that conflicts and other wars are a result of "Social Injustice, insecurity of life and property, territorial ambition, national pride, religious intolerance, ideological differences etc." These he aptly describes as the "oils igniting the flames of war all over" (14). Through these conflicts, the economic, political and social life of the people have been dislocated and destroyed.

Nevertheless, the government in an attempt to stem these conflicts has enlisted a number of measures, including workshops and conferences aimed at resolving the conflict situation in the Niger Delta. Despite the several measures fashioned by the government and its agencies, there does not seem any end in sight in the conflicts; if anything there seems to be a steady rise in the activities of the various militia groups. The reason for this may be a bit contentious, but with all intent and purpose, one can say that some of the measures taken have been too elitist in approach and design. To this extent, majority of the people (masses) are excluded in the process of peace building. It is in this regard that the medium of theatre is being advocated as a tool in conflict resolution and management.

Conflict: The Niger Delta issue

Conflict as a phenomenon can occur in variegated forms. It could occur at the intra-personal and inter-personal levels. It could also express itself at the group level, local, state or national levels. Conflict can also assume international dimension when such situation is between two countries. However it may be, a feature common to all forms of conflict is that it must express itself in a communicable form. But in the Niger Delta, the

most prominent form in which conflict seems to be expressed is through violence. Adler and Rodman (1990:180) define conflict as "an expressed struggle between two interdependent parties who perceive incompatibility goals, scarce resources, and interference from other party in achieving their goals. Conflict as observed by Adler and Rodman is sufficient enough to provide one with an understanding of the reasons for the various struggles by the groups in the Niger Delta. It is an observable fact that the oil-bearing communities are living in a world stifled by extreme poverty and hardship, and for survival, have to fight to be heard by the "new feudal lords" and the government, especially as it relates to the allocation of scarce resources. It is this, it may seem, that informed the people of Niger Delta in putting up spirited effort to have some measure of control of their God-given resources; an agenda that was pursued with all vehemence at the political reform conference under General Olusegun Obasanjo's regime in 2005.

Perhaps, one of the major causes of conflict in the Niger Delta region is the struggle for control and equitable and justiciable means of distribution of wealth. There is a perceived marginalization of the region described as the "goose that lays the golden egg", in terms of wealth distribution, despite her enormous contribution to the revenue generation in the country. In fact, the Niger Delta region generates about 90% of the total revenue accruing the federation account. Developments in this region do not in any way reflect a fair or justifiable measure, and therefore attempts are made to force the authorities to concede more allocation to the people. One of the methods adopted is to kidnap expatriates and top management staffs of the oil companies operating in the area and forcing a negotiation with the parties involved. In "The Gospel of Wealth" Andrew Carnegie (1989:71) asserts that: "the problem of our age is the proper administration of wealth, that the ties of brother-hood may still bind together the rich and the poor in harmonious relationship". But unfortunately, this is not to be in the Nigerian situation. It stands to reason therefore that the perceived marginalization of the people of the Niger Delta and the despoliation of their environment, and the attendant conflicts have their roots in the exploration and exploitation of oil by the multi-

nationals.

Further to the above factors, as reasons for conflict in the Niger Delta, are the activities of the oil companies operating in the region. Despite the contribution of the people to the development of the Nigerian state, the region has remained largely underdeveloped in terms of social infrastructure and primarily healthcare Facilities. Worse still, their land is deprived and destroyed.

The ecological devastation and total oppression of the people, especially in the denial of their rights, including land rights are very much incidental to the conflict in the region (Tugbokorwei and Ogu-Raphael, 2008).

The above summation by Tugbokorwei and Ogu-Raphael is quite explicit in understanding the reasons for the agitation and struggle for the control of resources by the people. Perhaps of note, are the incidents in Umuechem in 1998 and Odi in 1999, in Rivers and Bayelsa states respectively, in which the military invaded and sacked the town with impunity. These two cases can be regarded as the high point, for which the only option left was through violent protests that has seen the growth of armed militia groups; including the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), Niger Delta People's Volunteer Force and Egbesu Boys, to mention just a few. Another factor that may have given rise to conflict in the Niger Delta is underdevelopment. This may be considered as a source of tension which, if not managed by appropriate institutional structures has the capability of snowballing into real conflict situation that may disrupt the existing social order. This no doubt, is the real situation in the Niger Delta. Underdevelopment of the Niger Delta has taken the form of none provision of portable water, affordable health-care delivery system and education. Worst of all, most of the oil-bearing communities are criss-crossed by oil pipelines and gas flairs burned around the clock at ground levels. These have posed great health and ecological problems for the region.

However, apart from the paradox of poverty amongst the plenty generated by the oil-bearing communities in the Niger Delta which also

relates to the vexed question of marginalization and unfairness in oil wealth distribution, are other issues which generate tension and conflict in the society, Subarno Chattarji (2004: 476). Some of these issues are not radically different from the ones articulated by Hagher earlier in this essay. In fact, there is a high degree of interrelatedness in the identifiable causes of conflict in the Niger Delta. It is in this light that Obi and Okwechima (2004:355) note that the emergent trends are reflected in the increased outbreak of violent inter-ethnic and inter-communal conflicts across the Niger Delta. Some of these conflicts have raged between neighboring towns, communities and even villages, and involving the use of fire arms, and most often, resulting in the loss of lives and invaluable properties. Sometimes, these conflicts have been between ethnic groups who have hitherto, subsisted in the same political unit. An example of this is the conflict between the Ijaw and Itsekiri, and Itsekiri – Urhobo communities in Warri in Delta State. The conflict in this instance, is not so much in the struggle or reaction against the exploitative tendency of the oil companies or in the ecological devastation of their ancestral habitat, but a struggle against the forcible incorporation of incompatible ethnic groups in Nigeria. According to Edevwie (2000):

One of the most noticeable pieces of evidence of ethnic conflict in Warri, in recent times flows from an action of the government of western Nigeria, which officially changed the title of the Itsekiri King from the Olu of Itsekiri to the Olu of Warri in May, 1965. The change was made at the request of the Itsekiri over the objection of the Urhobo who felt that the title, Olu of Warri would give the impression that the Olu was a paramount ruler of Warri.

From records and available facts, Warri has continued to be a home, not only to the Itsekiri, but also to the Ijaw and Urhobo ethnic nationalities. It was this resentment that degenerated into violence over time, resulting in the disruption in economic and socio-political lives of the people. Thus, one can conclude that the conflict in Warri arose each time because of the struggle to control and dominate local politics. But beyond this, is

also, the struggle for control, use and distribution of community land among a people whose ways of life are culturally at variance. Such a society, according to Horowitz (1985) "held together by the dint of the force of Colonial power is inherently a precarious and unstable forms".

Also incidental to conflict in the Niger Delta is the rivalry among the elites, particularly the political class who enlist youths in their area of influence to intimidate and harass their perceived opponents through manipulation by jostling for power and positions. The assertion by Osaghae (1994: 25) is sufficient in describing these elites. For him, "ethnicity is instigated and intensified by competition for control of state power which is necessary for attaining desirable goals of development. This and several other factors mentioned here, have been responsible for conflict in the Niger Delta.

Conflict resolution/management in the Niger Delta

Boniface Anyanwu (2004) writes that man as a social animal desires constant change, which attempts to foster the relationship amongst members of his community. Such relationships when consolidated upon can help to bring about development. Going further, he states that it is impossible to manage conflict; except it is borne in mind that conflict is a necessary human condition. Therefore, to perceive of it only as a negative phenomenon may be misleading. Conflict would always arise for as long as there continues to be difference in thoughts, opinions and ideas. But the avoidance of a complete breakdown and its resultant effect is the ability to manage it. It is for this reason that various methods have been suggested and applied in the management of conflict in the Niger Delta. Among the various methods are; the creation of democratic structures, aimed at providing predictable arrangements in which collective decision can be taken, establishment of sustainable development plan which according to Onduku (2001), is structured towards providing a frame work for the integration of development strategies and environmental policies, and environmental policy shift.

The argument about underdevelopment in the Niger Delta has always been stressed, and perhaps also may continue to generate attention

until genuine attention is given the region. Therefore, in terms of sustainable development one is referring to a situation of social and economic change in the living conditions of the people of Niger Delta. This no doubt, will require a shift in policy thrust that will see the people enjoy some basic social amenities.

Ken Saro-Wiwa (1995:97) writes that the Niger Delta is one of the richest areas on earth with a fragile ecosystem. He therefore, considers shell's despoliation of the Niger Delta as a crime against humanity. In redressing the environmental issue, it has been suggested that the ecosystem, including all aquatic life be taken into consideration by the oil multi-nationals and the political authorities controlling the forces in the society. Other methods that have been advocated also include: a process of socialization of production processes and consumption of the people's common resources, which will see the employment of indigenes of the oil-bearing communities, and also a good measure of the control of the resources by the people themselves. It is in this light that Okaba (2004:24) opines that if they entrust in the hands of the people an appreciable amount of the revenue from oil for the development of such places, it would help to douse tension in the Niger Delta.

But in spite of the methods applied in the resolution of conflict in the Niger Delta region, conflict in a number of the communities seemed intractable. The reason for this may be a refusal to comply fully with the strategies adopted or outright non-commitment on the part of the institutions involved. But quite disturbing is the fact that, most often, the people (masses) are not carried along in the process of mediation and resolution of conflict. Most often, the personalities involved in policy formulation, mediation and peace building are the elites, who have been accused of instigating some of the conflicts. They, at these fora become the all-knowing, and therefore, decisions taken are without the due consideration for the feelings and aspiration of the real sufferers in the host communities, from where oil is explored. The implication is that whatever decisions arrived at is forced down their throat, whether good or bad. And given that conflict and struggles are about attainment of specific goals, the people are denied their rights. It is in this regard, that

the theatre functions as a veritable tool for conflict resolution, using the democratic method in conflict resolution mechanism.

Theatre and conflict resolution

The medium of theatre, like other art forms has never received any considerable measure of attention from government and its agencies, perhaps because, it is considered as an 'unserious business' and a 'time waster'. Against the negative perceptions of the theatre, it is difficult to conceive of it as capable of generating any form of development, both for the individual and the society. But the functions and manifestation of the theatre in our society today, has taken a very radical dimension, such that the entertainment value has received some kind of de-emphasis. Its role now is to serve a more constructive purpose: one that will contribute to social and revolutionary change in the society. Obuh (1992:138) writing about the effectiveness of the theatre as an instrument of change states that:

One of the agents of socio-political change is drama/theatre. Drama is the most economical mode of experience, which conveys an idea that can be accepted as true. Drama's impact is also direct and more immediate than other forms of expression.

The functionality of the theatre is no longer in doubt, as many people have come to realize the potency of the theatre in development. It has the power to influence thought and opinion, and can serve as a popular and effective means of political propagation, economic empowerment and culture diffusion. In fact, it is a "medium through which the soul of man reaches out beyond itself to transform" (Sofola 1984: 2). The medium of the theatre as a communicative art has a very high correlation with development. It can act as a stimulant or tranquilizer for a people's understanding of their individual and collective development. In the third world countries, development is measured by the elimination of social problems, which have been identified to impede growth and improved condition of life. Such problems may include: poverty, disease, war and

crime. As a tranquilizer, the theatre can function to bring about peace and calm in conflict situation. An example of the functionality of the theatre in this present concern is the "Rwandan Ballet Isonga", where songs and dance were employed to mediate in the conflict between the major ethnic groups, the Hutus and Tutsis, in the Rwandan crisis.

From the above, it becomes clear that the role of the theatre in modern times has gone beyond entertainment; its role now is conditioned by social forces, and not mere aesthetic diversion. It is at the service of life, it contributes to the development of the society in much the same way as does the Engineer and Economist. The nature of theatre being advocated, if explored to its fullness can create the awareness that conflict is antithetical to societal progress and development, by helping the people to understand issues through metaphoric communication and providing a communal experience, which relates the individual to groups, and the groups to the forces controlling the society. The theatre in this sense, takes the masses into consideration in every aspect through a process of theatre for development (TFD). In this way, the theatre in performance can utilize the abundant ethno-cultural materials in terms of song, dance and music to meet the challenges in ethnic struggles.

Theatre for Development is a process of stimulating and sustaining participation with the target communities along developmental lines, using the world of the theatre to achieve real solutions to practical life problems affecting the people. It is a form of theatre aimed at transforming the people from being the object to the subject of development. This is because, as active participants in the development process they are able to contribute to decision making, especially as it affects them. Penina Mlama's description of the nature of theatre for development is quite instructive in this essay. For Mlama, this form of theatre is:

intended to empower the common man with a critical consciousness crucial to the struggle against forces responsible for this poverty. It is an attempt to enable the masses to break free from the culture of silence imposed on them and re-awaken or strengthen their latent culture of resistance and struggle which needs to

be part of the process to bring about their development (1991: 67).

For Mlama, the theatre functions as a tool for conscientization. Through this, the people are made aware of their predicaments, and are able to identify and analyze them towards finding solutions. Such awareness therefore, becomes a prelude for positive action.

The theatre as an alternative conflict resolution mechanism employs the democratic method in conflict mediation and remediation. This method, more than any other, would create the desired consciousness advocated by Mlama, as well as engender an awareness that would enlist the people of Niger Delta in the process of identifying the remote and immediate cause of the conflicts, analyzing their needs and making choices that would best suit them. The theatre in resolving conflict helps the people to hold effective discussions and work out strategies for dealing with the socio-economic and political conditions that affect them. It is a platform by the people, and for the people, which helps in stimulating a process of community or group problem solving and actions. Put succinctly in the words of Paulo Freire (1972:14) the theatre "can bring the community together, building community cohesiveness, raising important issues... creating a forum for discussion of these problems and stimulating group action". This form of theatre thrives on the popular aspirations of "the people" and not one imposed on them by the elites in society.

It has been advocated in conflict resolution and management strategy, that a grand alliance and coalition of ethnic groups be encouraged. The argument is that this would create interpersonal relationships. But this method has not received much success in conflict resolution in the Niger Delta because the various groups are not adequately represented in the mediation process. It is here again, that theatre can act as a cohesive force that will relate the individuals to groups towards a collective positive attitude that will engender peace and development. This kind of coalition will no doubt, generate common interest among the Niger Delta people, rather than promote ethnic interest, in the issues affecting them.

The argument for theatre as a medium for conflict resolution in the

this region is one that places it as a tool for remedial, non-formal education to conscientize the people and make them aware of their potentials of harnessing their individual energies, collectively towards addressing the myriad of problems they are face with, and not pick-up arms that will cause further destruction to lives and properties. Specifically, the performances will be used to stimulate the awareness among the contending forces to an understanding that lasting solutions to their problems can be achieved through constructive dialogue, understanding and trust in their ethnic struggle.

The theatre as an interventionist tool in conflict resolution employs the inside-out method in the practice of theatre for development. This method will involve the facilitators becoming part of the community by living in it for a period of time. This enables one to identify existing problems (first, hand as part of the people), and construct scenerios or play skits with the active participation of members of the community. This is why theatre for development is referred to as theatre for the people, by the people, about the people and from the people. This process of living among the people and generating a form of theatre with the involvement of the people is known as "Forum Theatre". Against this background, the theatre as a communicative and performative art has the potential to engender transformation and change in the Niger Delta that is beyond the mental and emotional faculties of man, and therefore, if harnessed can help man's creative abilities to develop the physical environment in which he subsists. This is the thrust of this paper.

Apart from the function of the theatre as a veritable tool for conflict resolution, there is also an absolute advantage, which the TFD practice has over other forms of communication that can make it very effective in resolving conflict in the Niger Delta. This is because the method has a clear-cut and well-defined system of monitoring and evaluation, which can ensure effective implementation of decisions and programmes designed for the people, by the people themselves. However, in spite of the fact that the medium of theatre can communicate and cause significant change in the polity of a nation, particularly in conflict management and resolution, the government and other concerned parties must live up to

the agreements reached, if further peace is not to be breached. One can notice that conflict in the Niger Delta has thrived and in fact, remains intractable because of the refusal of the authorities to implement decisions and policies that will affect the lives of the people. Therefore, employing the medium of the theatre in conflict resolution, in spite of the potentials examined in this essay, will come to nothing if all contending parties do not hold on faithfully to the agreements and decisions reached in the process, hence the appeal for a faithful implementation of decisions and programmes.

Conclusion

Conflict is a social condition, which generates tension in the society. In whatever form it takes, whether as religions or inter-ethnic conflict, the nature of resolution and management can help to define and shape its consequence on the people and the society. When not properly managed, it could degenerate into full-blown violence that can lead to a disruption of the socio-economic structure of the state. Conflict in any society, can stagnate the economy and hinder growth. It is therefore fundamental that, for a long lasting peace, unity, harmony and progress in the Niger Delta, issues capable of generating conflict must be identified, analyzed and managed using the models of conflict resolution. It is ones observation here, that for any development action in the Niger Delta to be effective, an understanding of the conditions for harmony and peace should be explored and exploited and all issues relating to conflict and development addressed, bearing in mind the interest of the people, for development is about people. It is in this regard, that the theatre can play a significant role in conflict mediation and remediation. It is evident from this discourse that theatre can help to objectify the various programmes in conflict management. The theatre in its active form can help to stimulate and sustain participation of the Niger Delta people along developmental lines. It is hoped that the functional importance which the theatre has assumed in recent times will be sustained though the involvement of government and public institutions, on account of its relevance and interventionist role in the development of the society.

References

- Anyanwu, B. C. 2004. *The media, conflict resolution and national development*. A paper presented at the 1st International Conference on African Arts (ICAA), Delta State University, Abraka.
- Carnegie, Andrew. 1989. The gospel of wealth. In Colombo, G et al. (eds.) *Rereading America: Cultural contents for critical thinking and writing*. New York St. Martins Press.
- Chattarji, Subarno. 2004. Developmental conflicts and protests in India and Nigeria: The Narmanda Bachao Andolan (NBA) and the movement against Chevron Texaco. In Duro Oni et al. (ed) *Nigeria and globalization discourse on identity politics and social conflict*. Ibadan: Stirlings Horden Publishers Ltd.
- Edevbie, Onoawari. 2000. *Who owns Warri? The politics of ethnic rivalry in the western Niger Delta region of Nigeria*. A paper presented at the 1st Annual Meeting and Conference of Urhobo Historical Society, Ontario, Canada.
- Hagher, Iyorwuese. 1997. *Lamp of peace*. Ibadan: Caltop Publications Ltd.
- Horowitz, D. L. 1985. *Ethnic groups in conflict*. Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Mlama, Penina. 1991. *Culture and development: The popular theatre approach in Africa*. Uppsala: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet.
- Obi, C. and Okwechime, I. 2004. Globalization and identity politics: The emerging patterns of inter-ethnic relations in Nigeria's Niger Delta. In Duro Oni et al. (ed) *Nigeria and globalization discourse on identity politics and social conflict*. Ibadan: Stirlings Horden Publishers Ltd.
- Obuh, O. S. 1992. Drama as instrument for mass mobilization: A critical analysis of some MAMSER drama programmes in Nigeria. In Malomo and Gbilekaa (ed.) *Theatre and politics in Nigeria*. Ibadan: Caltop Publishers Ltd.
- Okaba, Benjamin. 2004. *Oil exploration and the challenges of sustainable rural development*. Benin: International Publishing Company.
- Osaghae, E. 1994. Ethnicity and its management in Africa! The democratic link. *Cass Occasional Monographs*, No 2.

- Paulo, Freire. 1972. *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Penguin Books.
- Sofola, Zulu. 1984. *The artist and the tragedy of a nation*. Ibadan Caltop Publications (Nig) Ltd.
- Tugbokorowei, M.U. and Ogu-Raphael, I. 2008. *Agitation and the limits of rights: An assessment of Ahmed Yerima's Hard ground in the context of the Niger Delta question*. A paper presented at the 21st Annual Conference of Society of Nigerian Theatre Artists (SON TA), University of Benin.