

Full Length Research

The TfD Approach to the Niger Delta Crises: An Examination Of ‘The PEN’ as a Symbolic Tool of Deprivation

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The study critically looks at the socio-political, psychological and conflicts arising from Oil and Gas Operations in the Niger Delta area of Nigeria.. This paper therefore aims at (re)presenting theatre side-by-side other disciplines within the context of conflicts and crises management. The fallout of oil and gas operations in the area is a topical and highly volatile issue in the country since 1990s, especially as this resource is the economic mainstay of the nation until late 2014 when the sales and demand for crude oil began to dwindle. In order to proffer solution, the issue has been over-flogged through debates, playlets, seminars, video clips and so on. On one such workshops of crises management with the theme: ‘the fallout of oil and gas operations in the Niger Delta area: community point of view’ this writer was invited as a guest speaker. The first question raised the first year of my attendance borders on ‘the role of theatre personnel in crises management’, especially when they are neither social scientists nor economists?’ These questions is a reminder of the arguments on the relevance of theatre to the society during Plato and Socrates’ era; which one could have said to be non-consequential today, especially with the advent of films and home videos. The play titled ‘The Pen’ was staged by unskilled performers without rehearsal or knowledge of what was to unfold and it led to a heated discourse that helps to confirm that theatre through drama can be used for conflict resolution. In conclusion this paper is a report and analysis of the “The Pen” as a proof that TfD can be used as tool in handling topical issues as predominant in crises prone areas as the Niger Delta.

Keywords: TfD, Niger Delta Crises, the Pen.

INTRODUCTION

The argument of the relevance of theatre to the society during Plato and Socrates’ era could be said to be inconsequential today. Unfortunately, some still assumed the importance of theatre in its atavistic functionality of entertainment. This paper therefore aims at (re)presenting theatre side-by-side other disciplines within the context of conflicts and crises management. It also examines a play titled, ‘The Pen’, as a symbolic tool of deprivation in the Niger Delta. And finally it introduces theatre in its unique and unequivocal functions of propagating, conscientising and mobilising people towards a unifying societal development.

Methodologically, a qualitative approach was utilised to establish how the socio-political, psychological and conflicts arising from the fallout of oil and gas operations, predominant in the Niger Delta area of Nigeria was symbolically represented on stage in a play titled ‘The Pen’, without a direct pointer at anyone. Through this play the heated discourse established was as a result of the symbolic pointer, and the result was communal resolution on the way forward to solving the crises of the Niger Delta without external influence.

Significantly, this paper is a departure from the normal norm of the TfD approach which is a

collaborative effort of the skilled and/or the unskilled, and where the skilled dominates after days of interaction. The 'The Pen' was staged by unskilled performers without their knowledge of what was to unfold. And it served as an eye opener to all that the Theatre practitioner should not always depend on 'talkism' approach (Talkism is my coinage to describe the excessive paper presentations during conferences or seminars, talk shows, debates, etc whereby people stand to talk before audience, which often times are boring and relevant content lost to many) but that through symbolic representations psychological issues can be clearly and easily identified by all – that is, theatre can be a tool of concretising abstract issues..

Background to Study

The Niger Delta in Perspective

In recent times the Niger Delta area could be, arguably, one of the most controversial areas in Nigeria. Since the 1950s, the influence of oil and gas exploration and exploitation by oil multinational companies, such as Chevron/Texaco Nig., Shell Petroleum Development Company Nigeria Plc, Mobil etc and, oil serving agents have caused great disasters in the area. For instance, there are cases of oil spills between 1980 till date with mass destructive impact on communities in the Niger-Delta – destruction on land and properties, occupations and means of livelihood, etc. (Nyemutu, 1999:31; Okonta & Douglas, 2001:233; Project Rights Conference, 1998-99:8-9; Hutchful, 1985:51-62; Adebayo, 2000:32). In addition, the negative effects of gas flaring on both the environment and its habitat, is untoward. Its geographical location, which is about $\frac{2}{3}$ of the entire Nigeria coastline, is buffeted by the tide of Atlantic Ocean and the mainland is subjected to floods.

Descriptively, the word Niger Delta varies in definition and interpretation. Hornby describes Delta as 'an area of land at a river's mouth shaped like a TRIANGLE (1) and crossed by branches of the river going into sea'. (1995:308). Though, the Niger-Delta should have been in the real sense, those wetlands at the base of the river Niger, however, in Nigeria the Niger-Delta area according to excerpts from the NDDC website, comprises of all the contiguous nine oil producing states viz Akwa-Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross-river, Delta, Edo, Rivers, Abia, Imo and Ondo states, which covers an area of about 70 square kilometre and accounts for 7.5% of Nigeria's land mass.

Environmental Resources Managers Ltd. (1997), on their submission of the Niger Delta Environmental Survey defines this area as

Quaternary coastal and deltaic-plain sediments that are hydrologically bordered by water flow derived from the River Niger beginning above the bifurcation of the Niger River into the Nun and Forcados Rivers at

Aboh." This area according to the submission is, "north at Aboh (5°33'49N, 6°31'38"E); west from the Benin River estuary (5°44'11"N, 5°03'49"E); and east to the Imo River estuary (4°27'16"N, 7°35'27"E)". "The total land area thus defined as the Niger Delta is approximately 25,900 km² or approximately 2.8% of Nigeria's total land area."

This area, which is the scope of study is the world's third largest wetland after Holland and Mississippi and could be said to be a micro cog of Nigeria because of its diverse ethnicity and culture, it has estimated population of 20 million which comprises over forty different ethnic groups speaking 250 dialect across about 3,000 communities (by the 1999 Nigeria Census report).

Matters Arising

In June 2008, I was called upon to give a talk on "The Fallout of Oil and Gas Operations: the Community Point of View", by a Management Consultant, Lizzy Johnson Management Consultant on 'Managing a Workforce in a Hostile Environment for Oil and Gas Operations' at Asaba, Delta State, for some senior NNPC Staff. In September 2009, there was a repeat of same. To see the topic as both topical and highly volatile, especially within the context of presentation is an understatement. The questions raised the first year of my attendance formed the research questions – e.g. 'what is the role of theatre personnel in crises management?', 'Are they really of any significance when tackling socio-political issues?'

However, to simplify the questions further the 'Theatre for Development Approach (TfD)' was further looked into with the following as research statements. And in the course of research carried out by the writer of this paper between 2004 and 2005, it was discovered TfD is hardly used where necessary and when attempted it is restricted by the following factors:

- Within activities/campaign strategies other art forms but Theatre is given enough time. For instance, musicians, dancers and jokers/comedians are usually allowed to satisfy themselves on stage, while Theatre is given little and restricted minutes for performance.
- Instances where Theatre was used, it was as propagating tool to manipulate prevailing issues by organisations within some communities. For instance, Shell Petroleum Plc, as sole sponsor of TfD programmes in the area has tried to feature performances to justify her activities rather than sincerely proffer solution in the area.
- While some believe in the efficacy of TfD, professionals to assist in this area are difficult to come by or too expensive to employ, especially in cases where some feel theatre is a gift of acting.
- Some organisations who also believe in TfD approach

refused using it because of financial constraint. (Uwawah, 2006 p.)

Theoretical Foundations to Theatre Approach

Interestingly, there is nothing new under the sun as declared by wise King Solomon over 3,000 years ago. And this again takes us to the earliest debates which gave vent to the relevance of theatre. Schechner identifies the 6th and 5th century B.C. as the first era that find expression for philosophers who contend the relevance of theatre. These philosophers, he says, '...established the rationality as a dominant system of thought. Plato wanted a city, Aristotle a Science, governed by known, universal and generally accepted rules or laws...these laws had to be obeyed by people/actors (performers) as nonentities, '...unimportant and even sinful...' people who create distractions and tell lies, Aristotle on the other hand says, theatre is needed, since there is need for law and order in any society. And the best tool needed to actualise or teach these rules in the society is theatre, which, he describes as the 'imitation of an action'. In line with this thought, one could say theatre has overtime been a veritable socialising tool whose existence predates modern civilisation. It has been used across the ages as a tool for dissemination of information and entertainment. Ahmed Yerima affirms this when he defines drama (Theatre) as '...an attempt by the dramatists to capture an event in the form of dialogue and characters all spaced out within the conventions of action, space, time and place.

Mlama (as cited in Uwawah, 2006) on the other hand says it '...includes any performing art that represents life through symbiotic images or artistic expressions that is in the form of action...dance, drama, mime, narration or combination of any others.

As many as the definitions of theatre are, its origin is as relevant as its functionality across the ages, since this helps to fathom its immediate and distant import. At a point in history, Alfonso (as cited in Uwawah, 2006) declares that theatre grows spontaneously in every culture because it is the first attempt to express the identity of the community, either by the dramatization of problems or through the humorous representation of events.

No doubt, theatre is informed by each societal beliefs and norms as it has been argued in some quarters that there is an interface between the theatre and the society.

Nonetheless, beginning from the late 19th century, men who believe in a world of immediacy like Karl Marx spouted up with different experimentation and ideologies with the salient issue of **attitudinal change** in people and society. And with the agitation for change, theatre developed a better way to reach out to people, believing the only way out to subdue the agitation (of

economic deprivation, depression and war) in the air is through this 'art'. Thus, ideologists such as Artaud, who proposes that 'the theatre abandons its naturalistic set, space and language to create a new order' (Huxley, 2000, p.90) as against Stanislavsky whose ideology lies in the naturalistic or realistic theatre with paradigmatic 'magic if'. Brecht, another avant-garde director, philosophizes that the theatre should not merely be used for entertainment but as a sensitizing tool. He tried to recreate that theatre of old where the fourth wall is irrelevant by making the audience a part of the action on stage. This his approach, the post-modernists such as Augusto Boal delved into to develop 'a series of strategies to effect change in the lives of individuals on a personal, social and political level'. Thereafter, Boal, was able to transform Theatre from the 'monologue' (his idea of European theatre) traditional performance into a 'dialogue' between the audience and stage, because the art is meant for all and by all towards a unified goal – to effect change (90).

Theatre for Development Approach

In as much as theatre's existence is indisputable, its functionality as contributory factor to development depends on the approach employed. This Mda (1993 p.19) justifies when he says 'drama can raise consciousness because it is a mode of communication that has life of its own... It allows the audience to take collective imaginative refuge in a more pleasurable realm of existence than their everyday life.'

Another approach is the Popular Theatre Approach (PTA) this theatre strives better as a form of non-formal education. This approach as described by Crow and Etherton (1985:574) is that Theatre,

through which intellectuals tries to communicate with the people most disadvantaged in their society either by presenting plays to them in which problems of society are articulated from the point of view of the people, or by getting them to present plays to themselves which increasingly help them to analyse their society.

As a result, their thoughts are systematically channelled towards a meaningful civic responsibility. As Oga (as cited in Uwawah, 2006) emphasises, 'Popular Theatre may be best appreciated as a non-formal education method from three perspectives (1) agitation/propaganda (agit/prop), (2) participatory theatre and (3) theatre for conscientisation'.

Also, there is Theatre for Development Approach (TfD). This is a people oriented Theatre which aims at disseminating information to the people that will enhance their social development, notwithstanding the theatrical approach used. It strives especially in educational sectors (higher education) where students/communities are used. It is characterised as follows:

- i. It is people oriented in that the audience are allowed to participate in the activities on stage.
- ii. The performances are usually free.
- iii. Performers are usually grounded beforehand.
- iv. No formal stage is needed, that is an empty space is all that is needed.
- v. There is room for post-performance discussion.

Theatre for Development actually starts where the performances (drama sketches, dances and songs) ends. It could be said that it starts in different stages which are made of seven phases as parameters: Theme and Objective; Research/Data collection; Data Analysis; Scenario Formation; Play Rehearsals; Play Performance and Evaluation and Follow up.

Unfortunately, the TfD approach is restricted as it relies majorly on preproduction approach which depends on/ require a familiarisation of both the human and the community. Thus, a need to redefine the functionality of theatre practitioners on one side, and the art itself on the other, as a way forward in crises management.

State of The Art – Niger Delta in 2013

Previously, the cross-current of crises in Niger Delta has defied every attempt at development. For instance, despite all developmental strategies employed by both government and non-governmental agencies, such as increase in allocation to the area as mentioned in Tell (August 2005), interventions of activists' movements as observed by Ikelegbe (2001:444-451), intervention of international bodies such as European Union, WHO, USAID, UNESCO etc, cases of cross-current of crises in the area are in the increase, claiming lives and properties, thus putting development at a standstill. (Uwawah, 2006:6). On her part, government established the Niger-Delta Development Board, **(NDDB)** in 1960, River Basin Development Authority in 1980s, President Shehu Shagari's Presidential Task Force to Niger-Delta, Oil Mineral Producing Area Development Commission (**OMPADEC**) in 1993 by Babangida, NDDC and others. On the part of the community and youths, Non-governmental organisations such as, MOSOP (Movement of the Survival of Ogoni People) rather than their attempt yielding positively, it has resulted to wilful killing, kidnapping etc. Thus as observed by a social-scientist, Integrated Rural Development which has been gaining popularity since 1970, could be described as Ruttam states, 'an ideology in search of a methodology or a technology' (Ozo, 1987:9). Unfortunately, 41 years after, this methodology or technology (IRD) is yet to achieve its objective, despite the advance in Information-Technology, especially in the Niger Delta. It is thus, not out of place to say here, therefore, that TfD could be said, to be the methodology or technology needed for the development

of the Niger Delta whose problem is more of psychological than physical. To the TfD approach I decided to attempt with a performance titled: The Pen.

The Performance – THE PEN:

I requested for three volunteers out of the 30 people in attendance as major actors. Two males volunteered and a lady (though reluctant at first), making three in all. While everyone else in the hall is part of the action. The first two did not know what they were to do but I whispered into the ear of the female to pick the pen about to be dropped on the table and hold unto it tenaciously. Immediately the three were seated apart from the others the pen was placed on the table, and she quickly and quietly grabbed it. Others saw the action, since the pen was irrelevant to them they did not pay attention. When the play was about to commence I openly borrowed the pen from her and announced to the house that we are now in the theatre and everybody is an actor and there is no spectator, so we all are free to comment and pass judgement. In addition, to that I explained to the house that from the moment the play starts, only one pen is functional, which is the one in my hand, and of course everyone knows I borrowed it from the lady. So any other pen in the hall is inconsequential and thus, does not exist. On that note I returned it to the owner. Facing the three on stage I told them to write (after giving each a sheet of paper), 'living is a right and not a privilege'. The lady wrote and sat back. Others requested for the pen to write since it is the only functional pen. She refused. Argument ensued both from the floor and her colleagues. One in particular was very aggressive and almost resulted to abuse and threat, while the other tried to cajole her into releasing the pen and some either encouraged or discouraged her from keeping the pen. This continued for about fifteen minutes. Interestingly, the aggressive one, in the course of the argument exchanged his sheet of paper with hers and presented it when asked. At a point everyone including the consultant forgot it was a play because it moved out of the conscious into the subconscious and everybody sees the evil being perpetuated by withholding the Pen.

The discourse

At the end of the play, I left the centre stage for an open debate which lasted 45 minutes, chaired by the Chairman of the group and moderated by the chief consultant. Thus, questions such as, the identity of who holds the Pen? Why did she hold on to the Pen? Would it not have been wiser and easier to pass the Pen round? If she had passed the Pen around, the whole exercise would not have taken more than a minute to conclude instead of it dragging endlessly, were raised. In

another vein, could it not have been possible to source for more Pens rather than just holding on to one? What is the relevance of this play in the management of Niger Delta crises?

Symbolically, the Pen stands as the oil and gas in the Niger Delta region. The actors are the stakeholders in the region. But significantly, who is she?

It was discovered that she could also be he – that is, the core explorers known as International Oil Companies (IOCs) and servicing companies operating in Nigeria – the likes of Mobil Oil, Texaco, Sunray-Enneco, Occidental, Agip and others; the indigenous people of the Niger Delta themselves – and their various groups (elders, youth) or the government – both past and present.

Why did she hold on to the Pen? Why did she not let it go round? It was discovered that it is because of greed. The greedy beneficiaries – the government, the leaders of indigenous people and the oil multinationals are the ones holding on to the Pen.

For instance, the initiatives of these oil sectors in this area are seen to be more concerned with shareholders than with stakeholders. For instance, the gains are enjoyed mostly by the middlemen who cart away benefits and leave the people themselves empty, which has resulted in the communities being left like empty shells while the individuals get bloated from ill-gotten gains; a deliberate attempt by these IOCs to shelve their social responsibilities to host communities in order to make more gains. Argument raised in some quarters is whether or not these companies should be left alone, since they pay taxes and perform other rights. But, a look at the content of the social responsibility of the IOCs is obvious. In spite of the elaborate spelt out responsibility schedule, it is sad that nothing in concrete terms is done by these oil companies to improve the lot of the people of the Niger Delta area. It is as if this oil companies and other oil private sectors overlook the popular saying that 'social responsibility is good business while good business is being socially responsible' to your immediate environment/community.

Similarly, the Government – local, state and federal, the middlemen or contractors, community leaders who by-pass the needs of the community for their own selfish needs and government officials who siphon our government coffers. These are the holders of the Pen.

Aftermath of Holding on to the Pen:

The first effect is insincerity on the part of the oil companies. The IOCs including oil service companies are insincere and have neglected their social responsibilities to the Niger Delta area. Overconfidence on their part has made them overlook the fact that these people will come to terms with their activities someday. Another effect is that of corruption in the Niger Delta

region, arguably, is an issue of corruption in Nigeria as a whole. From the leaders of these communities to the youths within the communities through government and non-government agents are sell-outs. For instance, starting from government; who desires power at all cost under the pretence of love and care of the people, Osofisan says:

Power...was merely an excuse to line their (the leaders) own pockets, and all the noisy programmes of 'development' announced with tedious frequency and fanfare became convenient drainage pipes through which national wealth was greedily siphoned into private bank accounts abroad. (1998:13)

A glance at Tell Magazine of July 2005 shows the extent to which some of these leaders go to siphon monies from the people – whether proven or otherwise, former Bayelsa Governor, Chief D.S.P. Alamiyeseigha, is one example, while Tafa Balogun, former Inspector General of Police is one and another is the suspected embezzlement by Iyabo Bello-Obasanjo. Corrupt practices loom all over the oil industry, where oil contractors mushroomed, and connived with foreign companies spirited away millions of uncounched for barrels of crude oil annually. As asserts by Brownwen Manby:

The pervasive corruption that has followed the oil industry profits the national and local power structures as well as adding a cost to the oil companies. Contracts from the oil companies, whether for development projects or for construction or other works needed for oil operations, provide spectacular opportunities for rake-off percentages both by middle management in the oil companies and by the contractors, who are themselves often associates of state military administrators, other government officials or traditional leaders. (1999:197-198)

In addition, the youths' role in the divide and rule game is a case of the highest bidder wins the lot, thus, becoming puns in the hands of greedy leaders to destroy/disrupt either proposed project or existing ones and also cause serious uproar within the community. This takes us to the issue of lack of respect for cultural norms. Instances abound as to youths' disrespect for elders and cultural norms that give vent to greed and selfish attitudes at the detriment of the communal development. Typical examples are the Youths of Ewvreni town in Ughelli North Local Government Area who in 2000 murdered their traditional ruler, Ovie Owin Kumami, for alleged corrupt practices. In Isoko South Local Government of Delta State, the Ovie of Uzere Idogri I fled into exile in 1994 because of the wrath of his people, concerning alleged charges of corruption brought against him, for the ₦30 million he received on behalf of his community and his inability to tar the link road of his community to other parts of the area after collecting ₦20 million paid by Shell Plc (perhaps, the question to ask is whether it is proper to handover community money to an individual, what happened to

the Board of Trustees?). no doubt, these elders deviated from the cultural norms that expect them to be responsible to both their communities and its inhabitants. This high rate of irresponsibility has now resulted to the disruptions of traditional unity, mutual trust, peace and tranquillity hitherto existing among oil producing communities. Take the instance of the killing of the four Ogoni elders by the youths and that of late Mr. Meshaghaghun (a retired Delta State Accountant General) by Ugborodo youths in 1998, all these as a result of mistrust and insincerity. Another question from these two is 'what will be the reaction of the bereaved families in the community?' A community that has hitherto lived as one has now by the reason of instant greed/mistrust due to oil exploration suddenly turned themselves into vultures feeding on each other as carcass.

Furthermore, the oil multinationals' operations also impinged upon the cultural values and mores of the people of the oil producing communities. The degree of distortion and recklessness with which they operate in the area, gave vent to some remarks that their operations aggress the cultural sensibilities of the people. Lately, falsification of indigene and indigenesness, especially areas noted before now as transit site for fishermen or farm settlement in time past which are now been developed and claimed after destroying the true owners.

The above information describes a reality of what is happening in the oil producing area in Nigeria. The level of dissatisfaction has led to various attacks on the oil producing companies and destruction on the oil pipes and hostage taking to prominent family members. As exemplified by the aggressive actor who intended collecting the Pen forcefully. But when he could not get it he resulted to plan B, which is hijacking what she has written. The other is the peaceful indigenous people who in order to shun violence resolved to dialogue, with the belief that he who fights and runs away leaves to fight another day. Unfortunately, they are being left without anything, not even a place to call their own.

The reason for these sad events could be attributed to the problem of oil well in the region which the people do not benefit from resulting into taking laws into their hands.

Sourcing for another Pen:

It was also revealed that Nigeria has over 20 unexplored mineral resources. Why hold on to only the crude oil ('The Pen'). Why not process all at the same time. Can one actually blame the people for agitating when for instance, the Ugborodo people have been crying for help long before 1979. A look at an article in Observer by Dan Mukoro (1979) says, '5,000 face Extinction'

Fear of extinction has gripped the 5,000 inhabitants of the oil rich town of Ugborodo in Warri Local Government Area of Bendel State. Ugborodo ... has three major forces working against its survivals...//It is on the Atlantic extreme ...off the Escravos River and under constant battering by sea. // The shores and habitable parts of town have been sinking and consequently being washed away as a result of continuous land and off-shore oil operations which have rendered the area vulnerable to the encroaching sea. // The community has lost eight kilometres of homeland to the sea and others to oil companies by way of wells, canals, ditches and has found itself driven back to swamp land infested by disease-carrying mosquitoes...

Lamentably, for over 50 years of oil exploration in Nigeria, the same issue raised incidentally 30 years ago is still making the headline, very unfortunate indeed.

CONCLUSION

The issue of Theatre for Development has made remarkable contributions in the developmental stages of the world. The place of Theatre in the dissemination of information and, attitudinal and behavioural change is in-exhaustive. Undoubtedly TfD approach is a better platform for crises management as against other forms such as 'holding talks' during workshops by political scientist, social scientists or Joint Task Force (of the armed forces in the case of Nigeria) or the purported 'Amnesty' by the Nigerian government. Yes, **The Pen** is a proof that theatre apart from its potential to entertain is more advantageous since there is the possibility of transforming ourselves in theatre (drama) – our knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, even bodily, posture, especially in the way we (re)present ourselves to the world. The Pen was an eye opener, that Theatre possesses a power that supports the '...notion that only by their own participation can their lives change and society become more democratic' (Alfonso 1994:30). Thus, both for behaviour modification and attitudinal change, Theatre for Development Approach which is underpinned by reform is needed in the society, from the educational perspective to environmental, to health for a better condition of living and crisis management for healthy and holistic existence.

However, what separates 'The Pen' from other TfD approach lies in the following findings:

1. The need for rehearsals did not occur, only one of the performers was partially pre-empted concerning her role. And this is in agreement with Augusto Boal's 'the native ability, that is, the theatre where there is no spectators but spec-(actors)'.
2. The people used were professionals/crisis managers in their own field (oil & gas production in Nigeria), but on ground as participants in the experimentation.

3. The use of symbol – in this case ‘the pen’; where ‘the’ became a definite article, handy and unobtrusive.
4. The theatre practitioner also became both a visionary, and a silent advocate – silent advocacy – for instance, as not directly stating the obvious.

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