

THE GEOGRAPHICAL FACTOR IN EASTERN NIGER DELTA HISTORY AND CULTURE

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Abstract

Granted that as impactful as a factor may, it cannot be enough to explain all we need to know about a historical event, there is no doubt that in the context of Eastern Niger Delta history and culture, the geographical factor looms large among others. This paper assesses the role of the geographical factor in our understanding of Eastern Niger Delta history and culture.

Introduction

While a large degree of consensus exists among scholars on the fact that there is a continuous interaction between the natural environment and man, the same can hardly be said of exact nature of the impact the environment exerts on man. The issue assumes an even more controversial stance where we venture further to consider the nature of developmental implications a particular ecological milieu can have, or have had on men and societies. In other words, we have scholars arguing that some environmental features of some regions have served as impetus to development, while similar factors elsewhere may have served as impediments to development. In the Niger Delta region, for instance, there have been many instances in which governments, institutions and individuals have taken major decisions that have impacted significantly on the lives of the people based on their assessment and understanding of the relationship between geography and the developmental problems and prospects of the area. In a recent book by Okowa (1996), for instance, a strong case was made on how the tropical environment (inhabited by the Blacks) had contributed, and is contributing to their political, social and economic backwardness. He also argued that the cold and temperate climates (occupied by the Whites) have much to do for their political, social, and economic advancement. To him (1996):

Denied participation in the march of civilization for thousands of years by the impregnable jungle, the Negro did not take part in the history-long confrontation with questions. By the time the human development motions located in the Eurasia mass made contact with him, (the Negro), he was thousands of development-years behind. This is the tragedy of the Negro.

And, on the economically advanced nations, Okowa (1996:08) argues that they are developed because they are mostly located in the temperate parts of the world. He argues further that even within the individual developed nations, industrial development started earlier in the more temperate regions than in the hotter areas.

Modern industrial development in Italy, for example stated in the more temperate north which is far more developed than the south. Modern industrial development in the United States began in the

more temperate north. For Brazil, the more temperate south is more developed than the tropical north (Okowa 1996:108).

But then, the more fundamental question to be addressed is: in what specific ways does geography impact on development? Huntington in Okowa (1996:108) explains that the cool temperate region foistered on the inhabitants, greater mental and physical activities and initiative, while the tropics involved an easier life, and consequently, lassitude. It has also been argued that parasitic and infectious diseases were more common in the tropics than in the temperate and cold regions.

The mosquito, tse-tse fly and a host of other disease-carrying insects and creatures have their habitat in the hot and humid tropics (Okowa 196:09).

Huntington (1924) equally contends that geography and climate, and the resulting vegetation are the critical elements engendering migration, racial mixture and natural selection. And here also, it has been argued that the temperate world possesses more advantages in terms of large scale movements and the mixture of different human groups than the equatorial jungles of the tropics. The jungle, according to Okowa (1996:109), shielded the Negro of West Africa from the productive confrontations which the Europeans and Asians were subjected to, for over 3,000 years of man's march of development. Going by this school of thought, the Negro and all such 'jungle people' probably did not benefit from the improved genetically and cultural pools available to them (Okowa 1996:109).

There is no doubt that while some of these views may be historically valid, others are either exaggerations of the strength of the geographical factor or an incomplete understanding of the other factors in human history, as well as the potentialities of man in taming, over time, even the most inclement environment, to serve his miscellaneous needs. These opposing positions are, indeed, the basis of the two contending schools of thought, namely Geographical Determinism and Possibilism. While we shall resist the temptation of getting entangled in the controversial positions of these schools, it has to be conceded that as far as the Niger Delta is concerned, the physical environment has been a major factor influencing its history and culture, both for good and for bad. The fact that geography has impacted both negatively and positively on the developmental history of the delta is best illustrated by looking at how it has affected the area politically, economically and socio-culturally.

Background to the Bio-Physical and Human Environment of the Niger Delta

The Niger Delta was built-up by the River Niger, (and to some extent, its tributary, the Benue), through the deposits it has piled up for about 65 million years (Alagoa *et.al.* 1988:21-28). Specifically, however, we wish to concentrate on the eastern section of the delta, extending from the Fish Town River in the West, to the Imo River in the East. Ecologically, it is possible to sub-divide this sub-region into four broad zones, based on certain identifiable bio-physical characteristics. Starting from the extreme north we have the fresh water swamp with rain forest vegetation. Below this area are the salt water swamp with a predominantly mangrove vegetation, and the sandy beach ridges with rain forest vegetation. The remaining zone was usually over-looked by many previous writers, but which, because of its significance for the present study, is herein given a special recognition. This is the zone Scott (1966: 3) referred to as the 'off-shore zone'. It is made up of the coastal waters of the Atlantic Ocean.

Apart from its strategic value, it has also been found to be very rich in natural endowments, particularly marine resources like fish, as well as petroleum and natural gas. Like the other sections of the Niger Delta, our area of study is criss-crossed by a maze of estuaries, rivers, creeks, and creeklets, all of which ultimately empty their waters into the Atlantic Ocean. Prominent among these rivers are the Fish Town River, the Rivers Sangana, Nun, Brass, St. Nicholas, Santa Barbara and Bartholomew. The others include the Sombreiro, New Calabar, Orashi, Bonny, and the Imo Rivers. And, although the annual amount of rainfall decreases from the south to the north, the difference is negligible. And so, while in the south it is about 3,050 mm (or above in places like Twon-Brass, Akassa and Bonny which are located on the Atlantic beach ridges), it decreases only marginally to between 2,550 - 3050 mm in the northern extremes of the area.

Within the Eastern Delta are a diverse group of people. Of these, the Nembe (Brass), Kalahari (New Calabar), Okrika (the Wakirike), and Bonny/Opobo (Ibani), all of which are Ijo sub-groups, are the dominant. While these four communities shall be the main focus of our attention, we shall from time to time, make references to other Ijo and non-Ijo sub-groups, which at various epochs in their history, came to form the same political and/or socio-economic units with them. Here, we have in mind, communities such as the Akassa (Akaha), Mini (Abureni), and Ogbia in the Nembe area; Obonoma, Udekama, Bukuma, Abalama, Tombia, and Ido in the Kalahari area; Obulom (Abuloma) in Okrika; and the Obolo (Andoni), Nkoro and Defaka (Afakani and Nkoro) in the Ibani area. (Jenewari 1975). A linguistic map of the area indicates that the various communities of the Eastern Delta can be safely grouped into five languages. The Ijo-speaking communities in the area from a single sub-group of the Ijo, Akassa or Akaha, Nembe known as the Eastern Ijo. Its major dialects are (also known as Nembe - Akassa), Kalahari, Kirike (Okrika), Ibani and Nkoro. Bukuma and Obuloma belong to the Central Delta group of the Benue-Congo; Obulom Udekama belongs to the Delta-Edo group; while Ido and Obolo (Andoni) belong to the Lower-Cross group of the Benue-Congo. The last group is Defaka.

In Nigeria today, it has become a common practice for people to use history to forge false unities or baseless autonomies, depending on what their ultimate goals are. For our present purpose, it needs to be stated, that, we do not need to go that far to demonstrate that the Eastern Niger Delta is a viable unit of study. The reasons for this are many. First, there is the obvious similarity of their economic and socio-political institutions and organizations. This is, of course, partly due to the fact that the communities in this sub-region belong to the same culture area or cluster. A second point is that, apart from their geographical contiguity, these communities also share a similar environment and problems. Such problems include scarcity of dry and arable land; daily or seasonal flooding; and the reliance on external sources for their vegetable food requirements. These two points are so important that in the past, and even till recent times; it had been difficult to make a clear and firm demarcation of the geographical and cultural boundaries between one city-state and its neighbour(s). Indeed, it can be argued, that the incessant boundary disputes between some-of the communities in this area are, partly traceable to their geographical and cultural contiguity. Third, the dominant testimonies of the oral traditional historians from the Eastern Delta States relate them as a people with common historical roots in the Central Delta. The Nembe, for example, claim that some of their ancestors came from the Central Delta through Obiama. In similar claim, some Okrika trace

their roots to the Central Delta community of Isomabou, near Ikibiri. The Ibani and Kalahari also have similar traditions. The Ibani traditions, for instance, suggest ancestral roots in the IgbirMgbedi creek area of Central Delta. Further revelations from the Ibani traditions indicate that their founding ancestors might have migrated into the Northern Delta periphery and moved eastwards through the mainland to the IMdoki area of the Imo River Valley. It was from there they re-entered the Eastern Delta. The core Kalahari stock also claims to have originated from the same Igbiri-Igbedi creek region and followed a migration route, akin to that of the Ibani (Alagoa 1971).

There are other aspects of their history and culture which have tended to place them on the same footing. One is the similarity in the process through which they evolved their key sociopolitical institutions,-the institutions that have marked-them out as the 'Eastern Delta' or Eastern Ijo people, and created major differences between them and their immediate Ibibio and Igbo neighbours on the Nigerian mainland. There were (and are) other bilateral and multilateral ties between the city-states of the Eastern Delta that go further to give the people a sense of oneness. There were mutual cultural exchanges between the Kalabari and Nembe, Princewill (1980:13) wrote, for instance, that during the reign of King Amachree (Amakiri) 1 of Kalabari; the *ikpakpa* dance of Nembe was introduced to the Kalabari people". The Kalabari, or at-least a Kalabari related group, the Kula also contributed something to enrich the Nembe, culturally. The Ekine (Sekiapu) society is one such contribution. A similarly close tie can be identified also between the Ibani and Nembe; and the Nembe and Okrika. Writing on Nembe/Ibani relationships, Alagoa and Fombo (1972: 79-80) said that:

There was no occasion for rivalry in trade or dispute over territory, and both parties believed their national gods (Ikuba and Ogidiga) are related in spirit land.

Okrika/Nembe relations were similar to:

Ibani/Nembe relations. Alagoa writes that There was what amounted to spiritual sanctions for friendship since the gods of both peoples were believed to be related in spirit land.

The story is told of how a group of Nembe warriors could not land at Ogoloma in Okrika because they were transfixated in mainstream when they had already established a visual contact with the town, until perpetual oath for peace was secured. And, in his coronation address, a Nembe ruler, Chief Ambrose Alagoa, Mingi XI, also alluded to the primordial ties between his kingdom and Okrika when he said:

Owolomabiri (corrupted from Obolomabiri or Ogbolomabiri) in Okrika makes us kit and kin with the Okrikans whose blood relations we are, and this relationship remains inviolable till today (1979:3).

There were equally formidable links between the Okrika and Kalahari, as well as between Okrika and the Ibani, both in moments of peace and of war. Alagoa (1972:155-156) tells us that:

...the Kalahari-speaking Bile community, apparently contracted marriage alliance with Bonny. Kalahari too, especially Amakiri, attracted communities previously under Bonny, such as the Abalama and Tombia.

On the other hand, Okrika during the Atlantic trade relied almost solely on Bonny for the export of its wares from the hinterland. There were also claims that the national deities of the Ibani and the Wakirike (Ikuba and Fenibeso) had kinship ties in the spirit world. These and several other historical and cultural factors provide the ground for our consideration of the Eastern Delta as a suitable unit of study. But, more fundamentally, we find that until recently, this area had been making a very great impact on the wider world. It was one of the areas of early European activity in the West Africa. The Portuguese penetrated the Western Delta to the city of Benin in 1436, and had begun to transact business in parts of the Delta at a slightly earlier period. Pereira documented transactions on a low level at the dawn of the sixteenth century AD on the Rio Real, the combined estuary of the Bonny and New Calabar Rivers. When the Atlantic Slave Trade developed, the Eastern Delta played a major role in tapping the densely populated Igbo communities in their immediate hinterland. From the nineteenth and early twentieth century, the Eastern Delta came to be known as the 'Oil Rivers' by the European supercargoes on the coast. This was when the slave trade was abolished, and the Niger Delta became famous for its role in the oil-palm produce business with the Europeans. And from about the time of Nigeria's independence in 1960, it has gradually grown to become the most important economic region in the country, because, a large proportion of the country's petroleum and natural gas resources are produced in it. Indeed, it is common knowledge, that about 90% of Nigeria's gross domestic product, (G.D.P.) is derived from these resources.

In addition to the above, and possibly because this region also gave an early embrace to Christianity and western education, it has been supplying a disproportionately large number of highly qualified manpower to the modern sectors of the economy and society (Daminabo 1989).

Ironically, this area has in recent times fallen into a state of decay. The old city-states and their famous ports are a shadow of their past, while the bulk of the commercial activities and their attendant external economies had also passed over to the communities in the hinterland. Even the petroleum industry which had brought much wealth and influence to Nigeria is contributing to the decline, and not the advancement of the sub-region.

Impact of the Environment and Some Developmental Implications

These environmental features have had impacts and implications for the economic, social and political history and culture of the sub-region.

The Geographical Factor in Eastern Delta Political History

Both scholars and politicians are agreed on the links between geography and politics, even within the narrow confines of the Niger Delta. Politicians of the Niger Delta area in particular, have been quick in emphasizing the geographical condition of the area as the basis for many of their demands sometimes for special treatment.

In the 1959 *Manifesto for the Federal Election by the Niger Delta Congress, (NDC)*, the political party of the natives of the delta was quite clear on this issue. In Article 9, for example, the NDC declared that:

The forces of geography and environment are factors that influence life of man; and should therefore be reflected in the constitution of a country (p. 7).

The party stressed that the physical configuration of the Niger Delta was so different from the rest of the country that its economic, political and social problems were not understood by those living outside the region. The party therefore recommended that the Federal authorities should, from the angle of geography and environment, create a state for the area to address their peculiar developmental needs. Earlier in 1958, the leaders of the area had placed before the Willink's Commission, virtually the same geographical argument to earn a 'special area' status. The Commission, in considering the complaints of the Niger Delta people had agreed largely with them, that actually, geography had a lot to do with the political and developmental problems of the area. The Commission's report emphasized that:

Communications are very difficult in the area divided by creeks and rivers, in which there is a tidal rise and fall owing to the fluctuations of the Niger, which rises by as much as 30 ft. at certain times of the year (pp. 41-42).

The Commission further noted that as a consequence of the deltaic terrain of the region, the area requires expenditure not so much on roads and bridges as on the prevention of erosion, clearing of snags from waterways, and on constant dredging. The provision of other infrastructures was also more expensive in the area than on the mainland.

...A 40-bed hospital which elsewhere might have cost £1000 a bed had cost £69,000, nearly twice as much (1958:42).

It is interesting to note that just as the leaders of the Niger Delta had employed geography as a tool to make their case, the Willink's Commission had equally employed geographical arguments to reject their most important demand, the call for a separate state.

--- a state consisting of these three Divisions (Ogoni, Degema and Brass) together with the Western Ijaws would be...divided into two parts by PortHarcourt and an arm or sea which runs up to it. To create such a state would cut-off the inhabitants from their most probable source of supply (1958:51).

But if geographical factors have provided the excuses for the non-creation of a separate state for the delta people at this crucial stage in their political development, it needs to be recalled that the same geographical features been seen by some scholars as instrumental to the establishments of the classical Eastern Niger Delta city-states. Alagoa (1970 and 1971), for instance, been consistent in stating and re-stating the argument that, the nature of the Eastern Delta socio-political development was different from that of the Central and Western Delta, because of the differences in their environmental conditions and challenges. The fresh water swamp environment of the Central and Western Delta favoured a predominantly gerocratic political culture, while the salt water swamp environment of the Eastern Delta supported a meritocratic political culture. Tekenah (1989:4) also holds a similar view. To him, the delta communities should not complain unduly of an inclement environment because

The delta environment is not as unkind as the environment of people, throughout the world, who had to overcome such hazards of nature as deserts, ice, floods, typhoons, mountains, volcanoes and earthquakes.

It can be seen, therefore, that as far as the political history of the Eastern Niger Delta is concerned, environmental forces have served both as impediments and as catalysts for

development. With concerted effort, then, it is obvious that environmental factors can be exploited to the political advantage of the area.

The Environmental Factor in Eastern Delta Economic History

As a consequence of the deltaic nature of the sub-region, the economic structure of the area has been affected. While the predominant occupation of the people in the fresh water swamp is farming, with fishing and trading playing only a subsidiary role; the main occupations of the salt-water swamp and sandy beach ridges dwellers are, predominantly fishing and trading, with others occupying only a secondary place. The latter group therefore relies on their fresh-water, and more importantly, their hinterland neighbours for their vegetable diet. Again, it is to be noted that, the Eastern Delta was a difficult place to eke-out a living. In the pre-European epoch, the people operated a simple fishing, salt-making and trading economy—this being what the environment could support. Obviously, then, the prosperity of the area in later years was based, not so much on its local resources as it was on the effective middleman role played by its merchant princes in the overseas trade. It is important to note, that their realisation of their agricultural deficiencies made them to exploit their strategic geographical location between the visiting European supercargoes at the coast and the hinterland agricultural communities to take their mark the Atlantic trade era.

Much of the development they attained in various aspects of life may therefore be traced to that strategic geographical position they occupied and exploited maximally. It is not surprising, therefore, that from about the dying years of the nineteenth century, when the British supercargoes began to by-pass the Eastern Delta merchants, the people suffered a drastic economic decline. The reasons for the British decision to bypass the Delta traders were also founded largely on environmental grounds. First, by its very nature, the predominant mangrove swamp delta was not blessed with the oil-palm trees from which the palm-produce needed by the British traders were to be extracted. Indeed, one of the early European supercargoes, Mac-Gregor Laird, is quoted to have said that the soil of the Niger Delta is *too poor to produce a ton of palm-oil*. The Lander brothers (Richard and John Lander) who visited Nembeland and Akassa in the nineteenth century were even less charitable in their descriptor of the soil.

The soil in the vicinity of Brass is for the most part poor and marshy, though it is covered with a rank, luxuriant and impenetrable vegetation: even in the hands of an active, industrious race, it would offer almost insuperable obstacles to general cultivation (Hallet, 1965:267).

Secondly, when efforts were made to construct a rail line from Enugu to the coast for the dual purpose of evacuating the coal from the Enugu mines and, the agricultural resource; from the rest of the delta hinterland, the marshy nature of the delta soil was found to be unsuitable to provide the strong substructure necessary for the heavy-duty rail-lines that were to be constructed. The Eastern Delta did not also possess natural harbours for the new kinds of port facilities of the time. And so, when the search for a suitable environment was made, Port Harcourt offered itself as a better alternative to any of the delta ports located closer to the Atlantic. Thirdly, the British were to find that the Eastern Delta lacked dry land areas which could have been developed into urban and industrial centres. To scholars like Briggs (1981:27

the geographical disadvantages are largely to blame for the underdevelopment of the Eastern delta. In his words:

...the relative backwardness of the swamp zone, its economic decline, as well as difficulties experienced in extending modern communication links and other infrastructure facilities to the swamp areas are all a function of the scarcity of land resources in the area (1981:27).

It is against this backdrop that we can adequately appreciate the siting of virtually all the key industrial projects like Oil Refineries, the Petrochemical Complex, and National Fertilizer Company, headquarters of the major oil companies and military formations, among others, in and around Port Harcourt in the mainland part of Rivers State, to the neglect of the riverine area.

In recent times, especially with growing governmental attention and the introduction of modern science and technology, the dismal and hope-damping picture earlier observers had painted of the delta is fast giving way to an hope-inspiring one. It is increasingly being acknowledged, that with sufficient political will, and private sector commitment, the delta could be turned into not just the 'food basket' of Nigeria, but also the industrial show-piece of the country. In the area of agriculture, for example, a closer study of the soils of the sub-region in recent times reveals that in terms of their suitability for agricultural production, the soils of the area may be classified into three broad sub-groups, namely, suitable, fairly suitable, and unsuitable (Okonny *et al*: 1989: 22-23).

The areas identified as agriculturally suitable included the coastal plain terrace plateau, high levee crest, high levees and meander belt ridges of the delta plain, and the remnants of the coastal terrace, among others. These soils are considered suitable because of their 'loamy texture and good drainage'. They are deep and porous, and therefore, not flooded, yet, easy to till. The fairly suitable soils are found in the low-lying levees of the Delta plain and high-lying beach ridges. Although soils in this group are easily leached and occasionally flooded, these landscapes are compensated for, by the adequate slope-gradient which ensure that it is quick and well-drained after heavy rains. This makes the area suitable for agriculture, particularly in the dry season.

It is the remaining part of the delta that conforms largely to the typical image of soils described by the earlier observers as 'unproductive'. These include the soils in the valley bottom and low-lying depressions of the coastal plain terrace; basin depressions of the delta plain, the brackish water zone; the tidal flats; and the low-lying ridges and trough of the beach ridge zones. According to Okonny *et.al.* (1989:23), these soils are not good for farming because, they:

are fine textured soils which remain flooded during the rainy season due to both rain and river water...and ...have limited suitability in the dry season because of their high clay content, which renders them sticky when wet, and hard when dry, making them difficult to till.

And for the mangrove soils which predominates the area, drainage and exposure to air causes the oxidation of sulphides, making them more acidic and toxic, according to the experts (Okonny *et. at.* 1988:23). Before concluding this unit, it may be necessary to observe that an

aspect of the economic history of the Eastern Delta in which environmental considerations seem to have influenced government's attitude is the formulation and implementation of the Rivers State Government's 'School to Land'⁷ and 'School-to-Water' Programmes.

During the regime of Governor Fidelis Oyakhilome of Rivers State, (1984- 1986), the government planned to launch the 'School -to -Water' Programme as the marine arm of the popular 'School -to -Land' Programme in 1985. The government could not, however, execute this water-based programme (as it easily did with the land based-School -to -Land programme), largely because of the higher cost of setting-up and sustaining the scheme (Okorobia 1989:143).

On the whole, therefore, it is clear that even in the economic sphere, environmental factors have impacted on the developmental history of the Eastern Delta. The impacts were both negative and positive, depending on either the ability of the people to devise the necessary tools to make the environment serve their need, or other human factors. It is likely, however, that in the foreseeable future, the people of the delta would be in a better position to tame and dominate even those seemingly invincible aspects of the environment to develop them economically.

Impact of the Environment on Educational, Social Development and Cultural Development

The inclement deltaic environment of the Eastern Delta has also been identified as part of the several factors responsible not just for the nature of society the area is known for, but also for the educational disadvantage the area suffers. Abernethy (1969:30-31) described the Niger Delta as possessing extremely unhealthy climate for missionaries, the harbingers of Christianity and Western education. Ayandele (1966:72) seems to support him. For he sees the major reason for the United Presbyterian Mission Board's spurning of the first offer of the bonny chiefs to open a mission and a school there to be 'the alleged unhealthy climate of Bonny'.

But this position has been queried recently by Okrosaya-Orubite (1990: 73), who wonders why:

if the swampy climate of the Niger Delta was unsuitable for European missionaries, why,,it seem to have accommodated European traders for centuries ?

He had then gone ahead to hazard a guess to the effect that the European traders were primarily segregated from the natives. They established contacts with the natives only when they needed to transact business with them. Most of the time, the supercargoes restricted themselves to their quarters, either the hulks or trading posts. The Europeans were, therefore, not mixing freely with native as the missionaries were to do later. By the nature of their job - that of leading the 'lost souls' to Christ - they were required to settle with the natives and mix freely with them. But then, looking critically at this debate, we find that the problems associated with the environment per se, could not have been so serious as to impede the educational development of the Eastern Delta. This is because, with the possible exception of the Catholics, the pioneer missionaries of other denominations were generally Black Christians. We agree, of course, that the generally swampy nature of the Eastern Delta made transport and communication comparatively less easy. And when viewed against the backdrop of the fact that among the early Christian missions, active in educational activities, the Roman Catholics were the most active and committed, it becomes easy to understand why the Eastern Delta

which hosted a negligible number of Catholics compared to Igboland, should be less developed, educationally, than their neighbours. The outstanding record of the Catholics in educational development has been attested to by Abernethy (1969:169) who wrote that by the mid-1950s, the Catholics were proprietors of about half the Eastern Region's primary schools, and were rapidly expanding in the secondary and teacher training fields.

The realities and rumours about the climate and inclement environmental conditions, therefore served as a dis-incentive to the predominantly white-staffed pro-education Catholic mission in the educational development of the Eastern Delta. It must be added, however, that the Catholics were not the only missionaries to back-out of the Eastern Delta on the ground of hostile environmental factors. In Opobo, King Jaja, after several unsuccessful attempts at preventing the Christian Missionary Society's influence eventually allowed the rival Wesley Yoruba mission to operate there. The Wesleyans could not, however take up the offer because of the difficulty they fore-saw in having to deal with the costly transport and communication problem of the delta. They also found that it would be difficult to open a missionary post in Opobo and supervise it from the headquarters, some 400 miles, away in Lagos. Opobo therefore missed an early opportunity of having an access to formal education through the Wesleyans (Tasie 1976).

Another area where geography seems to have contributed to the educational backwardness of the Niger Delta relates to the degree of accessibility of the area. From all indications, it is apparent, that school proprietors, particularly at the post-primary level, gave greater preference to communities in area with compact settlement pattern as well as areas that were easily accessible. Thus, according to Okorosaye-Orubite (1990:80), out of about 35 post-primary schools established in the old Rivers State by 1968, about 15 were located in Port Harcourt and its environs, largely because of its central location, accessibility and population density.

An ironical and unfortunate event bordering on the developmental history of the Niger Delta is the use of the same geographical argument to locate the head office complex of an agency designed to develop the underdeveloped Niger Delta, outside the area whose developmental problems it was, after several decades of struggle, established to solve. The agency in question is the Niger Delta Development Board (NDDDB) created to address the developmental problems of the area when the Willink's Minority Commission felt unable to recommend the creation of a State to take care of the sub-region's development problems. Rather than moving into the delta proper to have a direct feel of the people's problems and the prospects for developing the area, the Ijo sons appointed to manage the Board, preferred the comfort of Port Harcourt, located on the mainland, to operating from the problem area. Prominent among the Ijo sons were Chief I. S Anthony (Chairman) and Chief Amatari Zuofa (Secretary). Other members were A. M. Ndiomu, J. P. Boro, W. Abbey, F. M.

Biribina, E. B. Nyore and J. A. Deiye. According to one of the Board's information bulletins:

Port Harcourt is not in the Special Area of the Niger Delta for which the Board is responsible. But its choice as the location of the headquarters is for administrative convenience in view of the availability of electricity, water, industrial workshops, commercial houses, airport, postal and telephone connection. The existing town

centres within the jurisdiction of the Board could not offer these facilities (FGN, 1965:4)

Rather than providing these infrastructures in the deltaic area as part of their efforts at developing the region, they preferred to be intimidated by the geographical constraints of the area, and went for the easier option of operating from the mainland city of Port Harcourt due to the several comforts it provided. We view the decision to locate the headquarters of the Board outside the natural Niger Delta, very myopic for many reasons. It insulated and isolated the development administrators from having a direct feel of the problems they were appointed to solve. Again, it showed them to be less committed to resolving the developmental problems of their people than they would normally accept they were. They sought for their personal comfort at the expense of the teeming millions, whose comfort and welfare they were paid to promote and ensure. Normally, if the lack of the infrastructures they listed was a plausible reason, the best they should have done in the interest of the land and people of the Niger Delta Special Area was to provide these facilities. History, the world over, indicates that leaders who succeeded in solving the problems of their people were, generally, those who confronted/ rather than ran away, or sought for the easy way out of their problems. For running away from the lack of infrastructures, they had only accentuated or furthered the neglect of the people. At the same time, they had only succeeded in diverting the meagre material and human resources available for the development of the *Special Area* to the further development of the more developed Port Harcourt and its environs. This indeed, is a classic example of what Okowa (1991) calls the *Matthew effect* in national development; the view that development administrators have tended to practice the content of St. Mathew 25:29 which says:

For unto everyone that hath shall be given, and he shall have abundance: but from him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath.

This argument for, and practice of locating more and more development projects in and around Port Harcourt on the mainland, was a regular feature of the developmental history of the Niger Delta. In fact, it was this wrong developmental philosophy that ultimately led to the problem of *one-city syndrome* in the old Rivers State, as well as other problems that have arisen from it (Okorobia 1999). The interface between geography and Niger Delta cultural development is even more visible, whether we consider the material or ideational components of culture. The creativity, ideology, and philosophy of the Ijo and their neighbours are based on the motivation which the environment affords and encourages. Since people are born, grow-up and otherwise interact with specific locales, this has inevitably conditioned their cultural expression. The habitat of the Ijo, for instance, is predominantly swampland - either mangrove or freshwater swamp. While this environment has largely determined the traditional occupations of the Ijo- fishing, salt-making, canoe-carving, long distance river trade, seamanship and the piloting of ships, and a little farming; the harshness of this environment and its effect on the citizenry seem to be beyond the ability of most Nigerians to comprehend. Ijo literature expresses an intense awareness of the environment and the harshness that the people have to cope with. For example, Gabriel Okara describes an aspect of Okolo's journey to Sologa,

The engine canoe against the strong water pushed . . . Soon, the day's eye became bad. It became so bad and black and closed that it

could not be looked at. . . and the thunder sounded like the sound of one hundred canons going off near your ears , . . Then the sky suddenly broke and when the rain from above poured, it passed telling. The rain drops were like six-inch cannon balls. It did not rain like rain. It rained more than raining (The Voice, 6162).

The passengers' reaction was, of course, one of petrification,

'Ee, Woyengi, sorry for us!'

'Things of the soil of the town, for today only save us!' 'How is it!

How is it! Amadasu will you see us die? 'Blow it away, bio w it open!'

'Things that follow me! This about -to- happening big thing take

away!' 'Kolokumo Egbesu! How?' V God deliver us! O, Christ, sorry

for us O.' (61 - 62).

In their work, 'Creative Arts and Crafts', Bell-Gam, et.al ('The Ijo of Nigeria and the Diaspora', manuscript) also acknowledge the fact that the environment generates the creative and artistic activities of man in the Niger Delta. They see the typical Ijo man as 'an aquatic being' whose occupations are mostly fishing, farming and hunting which influence their creativity in arts and crafts. They also see the ceremonies or performances in the Ijo culture as influenced by the aquatic environment. These ceremonies integrate dance, music, masquerade, initiation, mime; acrobatics etc are performed with creative materials such as regalia costumes and other ritual objects. The Ijo creativity show-cases theatrical performances embracing the concept of total theatre, involves the artistic presentation of all the elements of arts (music, dance, drama, story-telling oral poetry and creative crafts). Again, while the performing arts in Ijo culture, including masquerades, dance, mime, songs, music, magic, and acrobatic are generated from the environment, they are also tailored to enforce discipline in the communities. For example OwuTunjo in Bonny is responsible for catching promiscuous young girls, Oghuema in Abua is used for purification rites and enforcing discipline. The Oghuema in Abua also serves judicial functions through mediating and invocation. The OwuTaria and AmuaMkpi in Opobo are used for discipline of young girls who violate puberty rites. The *OwuMgbuia* is used for declaring the Owu festival open and for closing ceremonies. In Kalahari, the *Mgbula* was used for carrying out opening and closing rituals at festivals, for healing "the sick and cleansing the town of evil. The *Kiriowu* players of Okrika also cleansed the town of epidemics (Bell-Gam, et.al in 'The Ijo of Nigeria and the Diaspora', manuscript).

Conclusion

Granted that as impactful as a factor may, it cannot be enough to explain all we need to know about a historical event, there is no doubt that in the context of Niger Delta history and culture, the geographical factor looms large among others (Alagoa,.....; Afigbo.....). This paper assesses the role of the geographical factor in our understanding of Niger Delta history and culture.

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