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The Idea of a Colony in Ifowodo's *The Oil Lamp*

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ABSTRACT

The Niger Delta region of Nigeria is one of the world's most extensive wetlands. Defined by dense mangroves, rain forest, creeks and rivers that empty into the Atlantic, this region of rich alluvial soil is blessed with abundance of mineral resources, especially crude oil which has remained the foundation of Nigeria's economy, a catalyst of national politics and a major foreign exchange earner for the country. However, a study of the region's history reveals a peculiar sense of objectification traceable to slave merchandise in the 16th century through western colonial economy to the post-independent period. Using Ogaga Ifowodo's poetry collection, *The Oil Lamp*, as a creative fulcrum, this paper exploits the theoretical grammar of Postcolonial Ecocriticism, Dialogism and Inter-textuality to interrogate the peculiar mode of objectification which the Niger Delta has faced through time and its ramifications in the history of Nigeria's awkward federation.

Key Words: Niger Delta poetry, Ogaga Ifowodo, Postcolonial Ecocriticism, Dialogism, Inter-textuality, Environment.

INTRODUCTION: THE LOCATION OF THE NIGER DELTA

The area called Niger Delta is one of the most controversial areas to define. Its delineation has been a subject of much political and economic consideration since British colonialism in Nigeria. Generally speaking, the Niger Delta is located at the south of the different tributaries of the River Niger. To properly understand the Niger Delta one needs to go back to K. Onwuka Dike's definition of the region. For him the Niger Delta stretches from "the region bounded by the Benin River on the West and the Cross River in the East ..." (19). He further states that the region stretches up to " ...

the coastal area where the Cameroon Mountains dip into the sea" (19). In contemporary Nigeria the area defined above can be traced from Benin to Cross River and covers nine contiguous southern Nigerian states namely, Abia, Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo, Imo, Ondo and Rivers states. As Dike identifies, across this region would be found the Jekiris (Itshekiri), Ijaws, Efiks, Ibibios and Ibos (20). But it should be noted that the Niger Delta is made up of much more ethnic clusters than Dike has identified.

The Niger Delta is characterised by dense mangroves and rain forest inter spaced by rivers, rivulets, streams and tortuous creeks which empty into the Atlantic. Put together, these different bodies of water makes the Niger Delta the third largest wetland in the world after Mississippi and Panatanal (Otoabasi Akpan 4). Because the Niger Delta is a flood plain, its generous rain fall and sedimentary deposits give it an alluvial soil that brings food and cash crops all year round. It is for reason of its rare species and agrarian bounty that Andy Rowell, James Marriott and Lorne Stockman have described the area as having "one of the highest levels of biodiversity on earth… and the bread basket of Nigeria" (8). Its strategic location by the Atlantic and its canals, rivers and streams which links the world to the Niger Delta hinterland and the whole of Nigeria has made the Niger Delta "the window to the world and the Gulf of Guinea in particular" (Otoabasi Akpan 25).

Given the subject matter under discussion, it is important to bring into perspective the subtle delineations of the area since colonial period. First, the fear of ethnic domination has made the minority ethnic groups in the Niger Delta to form a new sense of nationality which defines the Niger Delta in terms of the minority ethnic groups of the south-south of Nigeria. These minorities, bound in the east by the Ibo who occupy the rib of eastern Nigeria and in the western region by the Yoruba, are inclined to see the Niger Delta as constituting today's six south-south states namely Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo, and Rivers. Thus excluding the other three states, Abia and Imo (in the Ibo speaking eastern Nigeria) and Ondo (in the Yoruba dominated western Nigeria) from the region. This geo-political delineation has become more engaging in Nigeria's political economy since the discovery of crude oil which is found in lager quantity in the six south-south states mentioned above. More so, the clusters of minorities which make up this south-south geo-political zone argue that they are directly defined by the creeks of the delta which makes them "the true delta people" (Ikime 218) or "core Niger Delta" as Joe Ushie would prefer (526).

In spite of the above considerations which have become determinant of a lot of political decisions in the Nigerian state, my inclination in this paper is towards the conception of the Niger Delta as comprising the nine Nigerian states which span the east to the west of Nigeria. My position is informed by the definition of the region as proffered by Dike and by what Otobasi Akpan calls the "geographical particulars" (3) which are common to the nine states of the Niger Delta. As Akpan himself would put it "...since possession of oil

has made Ondo, Abia and Imo states to share same environmental properties and form a continuum with the original notion of the Niger Delta, they are ultimately made part of it" (8). This reasoning derives from the same paradigm as Chinyere Nwahunanya's position in the debate on the regionality of the Niger Delta. Considering a combination of cultural and geographical factors in his selection of critical essays for a Niger Delta anthology, Nwahunanya is of the opinion that the delineation of the region should be more complex than have been presented by Ikime and Ushie for instance. For him:

> the devastations resulting from oil exploration in Nigeria… occur in all the communities in the nine oil-producing states. And indeed, the affinity and kinship between the indigenes of Imo and Abia states, and the reverine communities in parts of Rivers and Bayelsa states, which is traceable as fallouts from the slave trade, go deeper than meet the ethnic political eye of separatist ethnic jingoist. People from these states still trace and interact with their relations across states in spite of geographical divisions and artificial political divides. (xv)

For me, the perspectives of Dike, Akpan and Nwahunaya are apolitical and more eco-centric. Their mapping of the Niger Delta would be better appreciated within the thought process of Bioregionalism. Propounded by Peter Berg, Bioregionalism defines any bioregion in terms of cultural and geographical factors. In this sense human and non-human variables are germane in mapping a bioregion. It is in this light that Berg sees a bioregion as "a cultural concept" ("Bioregion and Human Location", para. 24.), and "a terrain of consciousness" (Berg, 2002, para. 3). Therefore, the definition of a bioregion invites an interdisciplinary perspective that is more searching and eco-conscious. As Berg would have it, to comprehend a bioregion "… anthropological studies, historical accounts, social developments, customs, traditions and arts all play a part". It is within this paradigm that we should proceed to appreciate the dynamics of colonialism that is conceived in Ifowodo's *The Oil Lamp*.

Time and Space: the Niger Delta *Colony* in Historical Perspective

To better appreciate Ifowodo's the representation of the Niger Delta as colony it would be important to do so in historical perspective. In this regard we would take a trajectory from the early contact of Europeans with the Niger Delta environment in the 16th century when European slave merchants began to explore the region for slaves. Throughout the 16th to the 18th century Niger Delta aborigines were captured and shipped to Europe and the New world where they laboured to produce sugar cane, gum, spices and textile - part of the trivia (along with guns, spirits and mirrors) that were used to purchase more slaves from their homeland. This vicious commerce gave rise

to a transactional pattern which was then known as the "Atlantic Triangle" (Rowell, Marriott and Stockman 45) - a commercial triangle that is visible in the movement of slaves from Africa to Europe, then to the new world as laborers who produced consumables that were brought back to Africa. So popular was the Niger Delta in the slavery economy that Bonny, one of its towns was known as "Africa's greatest slave market" (Dike 13).

With the rise of industrial revolution in the west and the moral question that challenged slavery by the 18th century, the trade on human cargo became unpopular and gave way to the so called "legitimate trade" on palm oil and timber. Here again, the Niger Delta forest was rich in this essential commodities that were in high demand in Europe. The Royal Niger Company, an imperial progeny of the Royal African Company, ably represented the interest of the British throne and dominated the trade on palm oil which was produced in high quantity from all over the Niger Delta. Thus, the Niger Delta provided for the markets in Glasgow, Liverpool and other parts of Europe, where palm oil was factorized into soap, creams, margarine, lubricants and other sundry goods. The premium quality of the Niger Delta palm oil was so famous that it earned the name "Lagos Oil", a pet name which precedes today's - "sweet" crude – an epithet for the high quality crude oil extracted from the Niger Delta land.

Although the Royal Niger Company was not directly concerned with the administration of the "protectorates", as the British imperial patrimonies were known, its commercial interests was at the heart of the English imperial government and received the blessing of the crown in England. Hence, even the name "Oil Rivers Protectorate" as given to the Niger Delta indexed the overwhelming economic interest of British imperialism at the time. Dike confirms the fact that trade names such as "Oil Rivers Protectorates", "Gum Coast", "Malaguetta or Grain Coast" "the Tooth or Ivory Coast", "Gold Coast" and "the Slave Coast" as given to British dominion, were indicative of the commoditization of the African land in the early up to the 19th century (6).

However, the impulse of "legitimate trade" in the protectorate system was defined by usury, treachery and usurpation of local kingdoms and inheritances. For instance, it was in the spirit ownership that many Niger Delta merchant princes were conquered and exiled from their ancestral homeland to make way for British monopoly in the palm oil trade. Within the period, King Nana of Itshekiri was exiled to the Gold Coast and King Jaja of Opobo was exiled to the West Indies because of their fight against British monopoly in their domains. Some other Niger Delta monarchs such as King Eyo Honesty of Old Calabar, Koko of Nembe, Ovoramwen Nogbaisi of the Benin Empire and Kosoko of Lagos were to suffer similar fate in the hands of British Consuls who were *protecting* British trading interests.

This show of imperial machismo further objectified the Niger Delta and prospered the imperial metropolis over her contemporaries. It is instructive to note that the grandeur of Great Britain by the 19th century can be traced to the huge wealth that accrued from the slavery economy and the high business

transaction from the treacherous palm oil trade in the Niger Delta. Intriguingly, Rudyard Kipling's "Recessional" published in 1897 betrays the general sense of arrival and colonial psychology which characterized Victorian England at the twilight of the century. Though I shall dwell on the issue in more details later, it is important to also note here that the stereotypes – "Gentiles" and "lesser breeds without the law" (140) - which Kipling whipped up as early as the late 19th century indexed the impulse with which the Niger Delta was to be subjugated by the Nigerian state in the 20th century.

Having capitulated local princes and securing its Niger Delta (Niger Coast Protectorate) borders, the British imperial authority proceeded to amalgamate its Niger Delta possession with the rest of its Dominion in the Niger area in 1914 so as to give birth to the colony of Nigeria. While it continued to prosper in the palm oil trade of the Niger Delta, the quest for an alternative energy source that would fire British ships and industrial machines led the British authority to search for crude oil in the Niger Delta from the mid-20th century. With capital from the huge colonial business merger - Shell D'Arcy Explorations Parties (a precursor company to today's Shell BP) - the British Colonial government began to survey the waters and pristine forests of the Niger Delta for crude oil.

Indeed, prospecting for crude oil in the Niger Delta in the 1930s through the '40s was done in the most savage manner. Seismic activities were carried out in complete disrespect of the people's animistic cosmology and in disregard to the ecology of the Delta. Since independence from British colonial rule, the Nigerian government has not done much to improve the manner of oil exploration and exploitation in the Niger Delta. While Shell BP Still has great percentage of crude oil wells in the Niger Delta, the comprador Nigerian Government has signed more crude oil exploitation contracts with western oil companies over whom it has little control. In this situation crude oil exploration and exploitation has continued in the crudest manner, with poor sanitation practice and facilitated by a system of divide and rule, patronage and victimization of any opposition to the nefarious activities of powerful multinational oil companies. The Niger Delta writer and environmental activist, Ken Saro-Wiwa, along with eight others Niger Delta activists were judicially murdered under the general Sani Abacha dictatorship for their agitation for the rights of their Ogoni people and the fauna and flora of that environment.

In most of his publication, especially in his *On a Darkling plain* and his prison diary, *A Month and a Day*, Saro-Wiwa attributes exploitation and utter neglect of his Ogoni people in particular and the Niger Delta in general to the hegemony of the dominant ethnic groups – Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba - in Nigeria, who in turn control the power center of the Nigerian state. Obvious deriving his thoughts from Frantz Fanon and Lenin, Saro-wiwa has defined the situation under which his people thrive as "internal colonialism" (*A Month and a Day* 18) and "indigenous colonialism" (*On a Darkling Plain* 11) accordingly. In a postcolony where ethnicity and population size matter in

the control and distribution of privileges, Oshita Oshita has concluded that "since the discovery of oil and its exploitation, life in independent Nigeria became a sort of self-abnegation for minorities, a bargain for a new and more painful kind of indigenous enslavement" (39). This Night mare, of course, arises from the strain of objectification and otherness that the land has been subjected to for a century.

Theoretical Considerations

The first clause of this paper derives from Edward Marx's study of the impulse of excortication in modern poetry entitled *The Idea of a Colony: Cross Culturalism in Modern Poetry*. In that book Marx utilizes Jungian psychoanalysis to uncouple the propensity in different modern poets across cultures to make other peoples and cultures exotic. While one appreciates Marx's impressive psychoanalytic reading of Otherness as a psychological strain across cultures, this paper's interrogation of the same subject matter is predominantly located in the theoretical grammar of Postcolonial Ecocriticism, Dialogism and Intertextuality. This eclectic approach is in recognition of the subtleness of otherness in the Niger Delta which runs deeper than the human psychology and has ramifications on modern capitalism, the legacy of western colonialism, the nature of post-independent African states and their consequences on human and non-human environments.

As a theory of social and cultural criticism, postcolonialism has its roots in the politics of the tri-continental as they battle against western colonialism in Africa, Latin America and Asia. Ideologically postcolonialism is dedicated to uncouple all forms of hegemony and thus prioritize peripheral voices that stand the risk of strangulation. It is in this light that the objectification behind western incursion into Africa and other parts of the world, and its consequences is exposed. In the postcolonial paradigm the end of western colonialism only opened the space for other forms hegemony and subjugation in post-independent countries. It is in this regard that Ken Saro-wiwa's agitation against "internal colonialism" and "domestic colonialism" becomes important in this discourse.

Although there is a postcolonial skepticism about the western roots of ecocriticism, both theories have struck a powerful ideological synergy that is relevant to critique the philosophy behind western incursion into other lands and its consequences. In their attitude towards former protectorates and colonies, Europeans saw no distinction between the "natives", the animals, trees, water and other aspects of non-human environment which they configured as savage, primitive and given to possession and domination. Leaning on the thought process of Plumwood, Hugan and Tiffin have made the point that "European justification for invasion and colonialism proceeded from this basis, understanding non-European lands and people and animals that inhabited them as 'spaces', 'unused, underused or empty' " (5). Because

western colonialism implicates the human and non-human in one category, postcolonial ecocriticism provides us with the ideological instruments to break through the social, cultural and ecological pathologies implicit in western colonialism and its strains thereafter. In this regard, Huggan and Tiffin further explain that

> the very ideology of colonialism is thus one where anthropocentricism and Eurocentricism are inseparable, with the anthropocentricism underlying Eurocentricism being used to justify those forms of European colonialism that see 'indigenous cultures as "primitive", less rational, and closer to children, animals and nature. (5)

In many ways postcolonial ecocriticism co-articulates Dialogism, especially in the present discourse where we shall be engaging the interplay of voices and world views in a postcolonial text. It is intriguing to note that Mikhail Bakhtin describes language in ecoconscious terms when he explains that "the authentic environment of an utterance, the environment in which it lives and takes shape is dialogized heteroglossia ..." (272). In a "tension filled" (Bakhtin 272) text such as Ifowodo's *The Oil Lamp* we shall be contending with the "centripetal forces" (270) which work to totalise language/world views and the "centrifugal forces" (272) which decentre such acts of totalization.

In explaining the idea of the "chronotope" (84) – the tension of time and space in an image – Bakhtin distinguishes the "Idyllic chronotope" (103) through which he exposes two world views that are germane to our understanding of the ethos of colonialism and its clash with indigenous Niger Delta (African) conception of the environment. Explaining the Idyllic chronotope, Bakhin sees a difference between pre-capitalist and capitalist societies. In the pre-capitalist society, comparable to African societies before its encounter with western colonialism, time and space existed in a subtle balance – intertwined and ornate. Time was "profoundly spatial and concrete... . It is not separated from the earth or from nature. It, as well as the entire life of the human being, is all on the surface" (Bakhtin 208). In this "folkloric time" (210), as he goes further to explain, "Human life and nature are perceived in the same categories" (Bakhtin 208).

On the contrary in the capitalist society, time and space are objectified and given economic value. They are seen as malleable factors of production which can be commoditised for human gratification. But this entrepreneurial cosmology radically clashed with African pre-capitalist pastoral world view through western imperialism. It is important to note that Bakhtins conception of the environment in "folkloric time" is peculiarly African. Saro-wiwa expresses it in his own ecocentric insight to the tensioned word "Ogoni", which for him is an indigenous biocentric expression of the inexorable identity of his "native" people and their non-human environment. As he

explains, "I have used the term 'Ogoni' in preference to 'Ogoniland', which is fast becoming current; this is because to the Ogoni the land and people are one and are expressed as such in our local language. It emphasises, to my mind, the close relationship between Ogoni people and their environment" (Saro-Wiwa, 1995, 2).

In this paper, I argue that what constitutes colonialism in Ifowodo's The Oil Lamp is the disregard of this ornate animistic world view by British imperialism and the "Vampire Nigerian state". This, of course, wells from a capitalist world view that objectifies the other. But to better appreciate the depth of the idea of a colony in this discourse we have to be inter-textually located. This is because by its theoretical strategy, the inter-textual paradigm empowers the reader to negotiate different textual portals that form a universe of discourse in order to help access the complex nature of a cultural phenomenon. It is this subtle textual filiations that Jeanine Parisier Plottel indexes when she states that in the inter-textual mode "Interpretation is shaped by a complex of relations between the text, the reader, reading, writing, printing, publishing, and history: the history that is inscribed in the language of the text and in the history that is carried by the reader's reading" (xx).

Locating Ifowodo in Niger Delta poetry

Born in 1968, Ogaga Ifowodo is an Urhobo in the present Delta state of the south-south geo-political region of Nigeria. He studied Law in the University Ife (Obafemi Awolowo University) Nigeria and holds an MFA degree from Cornell University, USA. He is a fellow of the Iowa Writing Program and is a winner of "the Babara Goldsmith Freedom-to-Write award of the US PEN Centre" (Blurb, *The Oil Lamp*). Before *The Oil Lamp*, Ifowodo had published two other collections namely, *Home Land and Other Poems* (1998) and *Madiba* (2003). Because of his journalism and activism, Ifowodo was jailed by the General Sani Abacha junta in 1997.

In an earlier study I had seen Ifowodo's poetry as a quintessential representative of what could be considered the third generation of modern Nigerian poetry. Thus, confirming Adesanmi's accolade when he refers to Ifowodo as one of the "shining lights" of his generation (124). In this paper I study his poetry as part of the emerging canon of Niger Delta poetry. This sub-national poetry has bequeathed Nigeria a distinct genre which we can only refer to as eco-poetry, because of its ornate representation of the human and non human environment in the spirit promoting a peculiar sense of dwelling. Perhaps, it is Onookome Okome who offers us the most cryptic definition of Niger Delta literature through which we can appreciate the essence of its poetry. Thus he sees Niger Delta literature as a distinct body of literary expression that has stay(ed) close to the checkered but calibrated history of the subjugation of the peoples of the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. This body of literature calls to question the history of European colonization

and its aftermath. It dialogizes the seething impact of this history but it is the recent history of what Ken Saro Wiwa described as "internal colonization" that it speaks so eloquently about. ("Tanure Ojaide: A Biographical Essay"1).

The tradition of this poetry has been traced back to the writings of Olaudah Equino who G.G. Darah argues was a Niger Deltan kidnapped from his....homeland into slavery in the mid 18th century (6). However the contours of this sub-national poetry has been more formidably defined by J.P. Clark (Bekederemo), Gabriel Okara, Tanure Ojaide and a cluster of young poets among who Ifowodo stands out as one of the most engaging voices. Studies on Ifowodo

Interrogating the Niger Delta *Colony* in Ifowodo's *The Oil Lamp*

For me *The Oil Lamp* is the most engaging poetic narrative of modern domestic colonialism, neo-colonial politics and the repercussions of western colonial antecedents in an African land. Divided into five parts, *The Oil Lamp* contains a fictive re-telling of the painful stories of three oil producing communities in Nigeria's Niger Delta, namely "Jese", "Odi" and "Ogoni". The aborigines of these three oil rich communities are unjustly maligned and stereotyped by a parasitic state. Thus they are called "thieves and saboteurs" (15), "cowards (and) bastards" (28), "still primitive tribes" (37), and "half-breed" (37), stereotypes which echo Kipling's colonialist verse cited earlier. The logic behind the stereotypes is obviously to justify the usurpation, exploitation and oppression of a people and their land.

The tragic inferno which engulfed the whole community of Jese in 1998 provides the narrative plot of Part I of the collection. The fire incidence itself is an obvious consequence of years of neglect and abandonment of a people who, though rich by reason of the ownership of crude Oil in their land are left impoverished. Driven by survival instinct, the entire impoverished community saw a broken gas pipe as a golden opportunity to have a share of what has been denied them by the hegemonic state in which they have been conscripted by British colonialism. Thus, the broken pipe of Premium Motor Spirit becomes a means to earn a living. But in their ignorance, which is also a consequence of deeply rooted poverty, the tragic consequence of their misadventure never occurred to them.

Through an inter-textual re-interpretation of Dante's mythical "inferno", Ifowodo penetrates and uncouples the depth of dispossession and tragic existence of this Niger Delta people. The iconicity of a roaring fire that engulfs a people becomes a real expression of their hellish existence in a modern state. Articulating the position of the state on the tragic incidence the head-of-state concluded that the people would not compensate "*No,* he said, / *we must not encourage thieves and sabotuers*" (the Oil Lamp 15, author's emphasis). The logic of occupation and colonialism are betrayed in the speech of the Head-of-state; this Niger Delta people are not to be

compensated in spite of the state's implicit culpability, because they are not fit to share in the heritage of modern citizenship, they are the other.

The predicament of Jese is akin to the condition of Odi and Ogoni – place names that constitute Parts II and III of *The Oil Lamp*. The preoccupation of these two parts of the collection is the debate over ownership of the crude oil that abounds in these minority communities and the land as a whole. In real life the two communities had demonstrated against the Nigerian state's marginalization and neglect of their communities in spite of the rich natural resource that accounts for the stupendous wealth of the country. "A case of homicide" which inadvertently resulted from the Odi demonstration caused the Nigerian government to deploy disproportionate military force, "A battalion of Justice…" (21), to curb the violence. To prove to the "cowards and bastards" (28) who owns and controls the natural resources, the despatched soldiers rick havoc on the armless population. Through the graphic language of the media the reader comes to terms with the depth of devastation caused by the state's military and its brutal assertion of authority over the people: "Odi flattened, pays the heaviest price yet" / "There is no place called Odi anymore, says soldier." "We'll protect our oil wealth at any cost, says President" (31). Yet, confounded by the tragic reality of life in a supposedly independent country, "Pa Piriye" an old man with "hair and beard all white" drew a parallel between western imperial subjugation and the brutality of post-independent Nigeria on his Niger Delta people:

> When British soldiers looted and burned Benin, / We cursed strangemen come from beyond the sea, / From the land of the dead, so evil they had no skin / But who shall we curse now, who now is the enemy?/ My eyes have seen two evils, must not see another. (31 author's emphasis)

In the lines above one appreciates the double yoke of the Niger Delta as a post-independent colony in the 21st century. But it is in "Ogoni", Part III of the collection, which narrativizes the perilous experience of Ken Saro-Wiwa's ethnic group in the hands of the Nigerian army in the mid '90s, that Ifowodo climaxes the representation of this internal colony of our time. Taking advantage of a quarrel by Ogoni kith and kin over the states marginalization and despoliation of their ecology, the military superintendents of Ogoni exaggerated the crisis in order to justify a total besiegement, massacre and occupation of an already dispossessed people – an action which has been seen to be motivated by the powerful multinational oil company, Shell (Okonta and Dauglass 171).

In the classic tone of narratives of this nature, Ifowodo's poet persona retells the brutal ambush of Ogoni by the state's army. Playing on the stereotypic characterization of the Niger Delta by the neo-colonial Nigerian state the poet persona began thus: "Major Kitemo…, Chief pacifier / of the

lower Niger's / still primitive tribes…" engages the defiant people, who "for three years / had shut down Shell's oil wells / and slimmed the nation's purse" (37). After the besiegement of defenceless "natives" Major Kitemo, Ifowodo's fictional representation of the Nigerian Army Colonel, Paul Okuntimo, laboured to impress on the people the fact of Nigeria's colonial history, her "decrees and edicts" (40), which give her the right over possession of Ogoni.

However, through a dialogic heteroglozia, Ifowodo interpolates the peasants' own counter hegemonic/eco-centric logic. To challenge the states occupation of their homeland "An old man, parched and cracked / far worse than any sun-sucked patch of spilled-soaked land…" (38) makes bold to ask Major Kitemo, "Born in 1914, [Nigeria is] seventy-nine this year…", // "How long do you think we have been on this land, / how long the oil, the trees, the creeks and the rivers?" (39). A woman makes the debate more complex by questioning the composition of the Nigerian state: "No vex o, Oga Soja, but who / or Wetin make up this Nigeria" (40). Yet "a child… an ancient, a female and a sapling" makes complex the whole debate by questioning the legitimacy of the Nigerian rule over the people: "Excuse me, Sir," / "but in whose name, and by whose powers, / were the laws you cite made?" (41).

In the interlocution of the Ogoni we hear the voices of elements in the non-human environment. The people and their flora and fauna represent fringe voices in the (post)colony; they exist in the marginalised periphery of the Nigerian colony. Through the dialogic strategy of heteroglossia Ifowodo invests the poem with multi-vocality there by radicalising a highly structured literary genre. The inter-play of contending voices and positions in this collection infuses a polyglossic quality which in eco-critical terms is referred to as "ecotone" - "the synergy of discrepant perspectives" (Buell, *The Future of Environmental Criticism* 140). The stylistic strategy of ecotone ties up, interestingly, with the novelization of poetry which in Bakhtinian dialogics makes poetry "a prosaic key" (285), a deconstructive agency. In it, we witness how a micro-minority grapples with the tension of domestic post-colonial politics and the machinations of neo-colonial transnational oil companies.

Interestingly, the stereotypes of otherness and objectification, which we encounter in Ifowodo's *The Oil Lamp* is a trope that runs through contemporary Niger Delta poetry. Nimmo Bassey, another Niger Delta poet, offers us a classic inter-textual example of this sense of otherness in his "The United Niger Delta Oil Co." The poem itself creatively exploits the narrative pattern of Pablo Neruda's "The United Fruit Co." to expose the legion of multi-national capitalist forces that constitute the imperial regime in the Niger Delta today. In a cynical tone, Bassey refers to the contemporary colonial regime as "our loving United Niger Delta Oil Company Incorporated". The dominions that constitute this global empire are "Shell, Exxon-Mobil, Texaco, NNPC, ELF, Chevron, Agip, Statoil and similar

entities…" (22). For Bassey's poet persona, today's empire is a continuation of the Royal African company and the Royal Niger Company – the imperial trade empires of 17th - 19th centuries. In a tone that co-articulates Ifowodo's *The Oil Lamp* Bassey tells his reader of the new colonists' objectification and balkanization of the Niger Delta in our time. Having secured their business borders, the poet persona says: They re-christened their property / the savage land of the uncontacted / the savage land of the blind / the savage land of the powerless saboteurs (22).

The woes which this new colony experience pervade Ibiwary Ikiriko's only collection of poems - *Oily Tears of the Delta*. In many poems, the poet-persona - often metaphorised as the land or a personified river - sees himself as a victim of major forces in an unjust system. Hence, in Section III of "Evening Already" (11-6) the poet-persona tells the predicament "of the mini minor / Marginalized by the mighty plenty" (15). In his entire collection the binary opposition of "Big" upon "Small", "Them" versus "Us" or "Majority" over "Minority" becomes a constant motif in Ikiriko's post-colonial consciousness. This binary structure, as Niger Delta poets see it, captures the pattern of penurious existence that they find themselves in post-independent Nigerian.

To some extent, the minority status of the Niger Delta seems to be its bane especially in its experience in the Nigerian State. In all his writings on the Niger Delta question Ken Saro-Wiwa has endeavoured to expose the fallacies of number in the Nigerian state. In one instance Saro-Wiwa asserts that "...Nigerian politics is the harsh oppression of the minorities, the unabashed and remorseless exploitation of those handicapped by their numbers" (*On a Darkling Plain* 11). In fact in the same account Saro-Wiwa recalls what he refers to as "the language of colonialism" (12) expressed by a onetime Nigerian Permanent Secretary in the Federal Ministry of Mines and Power, who suggests that on account of "the small size and population of the oil producing areas..." their agitation can be undermined because, "they cannot threaten the stability of the country nor affect its continued economic development" (*On a Darkling Plane* 12). Thus, this mindset seems to have justified marginalization and complete defilement of the Niger Delta ecology through gas flares, oil sleek on rivers and farm lands and the apocalyptic massacre of armless Niger Delta populations over the years.

However, Azubike Iloeje, one of the most vehement critics of Ken Saro-Wiwa and the Niger Delta rhetoric of number, thinks that what Ken Saro-Wiwa decries as domestic colonialism is a misplaced revulsion to colonial "entrapment and conscription" (111). He prefers to see the suffering of the Ogoni and by extension all other Niger Delta minorities as the reality of all minorities within the phenomenon of the modern nation state. From the interpretive lens of Ronald Cohen, Iloeje explains "Saro-Wiwa's [and by extension the Niger Delta minorities'] fear of ethnic domination and injustice" as "… derived paradoxically…from the operation of that aspect of democracy which would allocate and or allow power and influence

commensurate with the numerical strength of constituent groups" (120). Among other assertions, Iloeje thinks that Saro-Wiwa is fighting against the reality of modern democracy.

On the contrary, I argue that Iloeje's critique is heavily informed by socio-political concerns only. Hence, his reading of Saro-Wiwa's minority discourse does not consider the implications of ecological realities which make the Niger Delta situation more complex. While ethnicity was deeply enthroned by British colonialism (Okwudiba 35), the discovery and exploitation of crude in the Niger Delta land has continually circumscribed the Niger Delta. Felix Akpan links the dubious shifts in the principle of revenue allocation, which prior to 1958, recognized the ecological fact of derivation, to the steady and purposeful marginalization of the Niger Delta. By the 60s through the 80s, that principle of derivation gave way to a centralized principle of revenue allocation which was basically to benefit the majority ethnic groups in Nigeria (141). Drawing from a deep awareness of this dubiousness, Oshita Oshita seems to support Akpan's eco-conscious perspective when he concludes that "since the discovery of oil and its exploitation, life in independent Nigeria became a sort of self-abnegation for minorities, a bargain for a new and more painful kind of indigenous enslavement" (39).

CONCLUSION

An eco-centric perspective into the history of the Niger Delta helps one to appreciate the peculiarities of that region's modern conditions. In discussing the Niger Delta situation as a post-colonial entity, I have endeavoured to show that the socio-political realities in the Niger Delta arise from ecological issues. The uniqueness of the (Niger Delta) poetry under discussion arises from the fact that it links the politics of state and culture to ecological realities, hence, making an inexorable link between the human and non-human in one discursive space. As Buell says of *Ceremony*, we can also say that in Ifowodo's *The Oil Lamp* "... its vision of human affairs is governed by a sense of their reciprocity with the land" (286). Indeed, in *The Oil Lamp*, the non-human environment is a major character in the whole tragic drama of existence in post-independent Nigeria. In this paper the idea of a colony is composite; it shows that the psychology which subjugates the human establishes the same category with the non-human.

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