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Artisanal Crude Refining in Niger Delta and its Impact on the Cultural and Religious Beliefs of the People

Elizabeth Okon John¹, Juongwa Nnadozie²

¹Department of Religious and Cultural studies,
 University of Calabar,
 P.M.B 1115, Eta 540004, Etta Agbo Rd, Calabar, Nigeria.
Email: elizabeth-john@unical.edu.ng

²Post Graduate Student, University of Port Harcourt,
 East/West Road, PMB 5323 Choba, Rivers State, Nigeria.
Email: Juongwannadozie@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

In the discourse on the impact of artisanal crude refining on the natural environment in the Niger Delta, the resultant effects of the environmental degradation on the traditional religious and cultural beliefs of the natives have been ignored. Against this backdrop, this paper aims at bringing to the fore the impact of artisanal crude refining activities on the traditional religious and cultural beliefs of the natives of the host communities. The paper adopts the analytical method in its investigation of the subject matter. It also adopts the tools of logical and critical evaluation. The investigation is limited to communities in Delta, Rivers and Bayelsa states of Nigeria. The paper submits that though most indigenes attribute the cause of the decline in traditional religious and cultural beliefs to the advent of Christianity in the region, the environmental degradation associated with oil exploration activities also plays a significant role in the decline of these beliefs.

Keywords: Nigeria; Niger Delta; Environmental Degradation; Religious Beliefs; culture.

INTRODUCTION

Since the dawn of the industrial revolution and the rise of capitalism and modern science and technology, the level of environmental degradation in the World has been on the increase. One of the effects of this new era is the loss of biodiversity especially, the extinction of some sacred plants and animals. Some estimates suggest that more

than 100 species (of plants and animals) are becoming extinct every day and that this rate could double or triple within the next few decades (Desjardins, 2013; Ilozobhie & Egu 2013).

The destruction of plants, animals and the pollution of local streams and rivers have affected the religious worship and rituals of adherents of traditional religions in the world especially in Africa and Asia. Elements of the natural world, such as mountains, rivers, and forests are often seen as sacred in many cultural traditions (Offiong 2016a; Offiong 2016b; Sachdeva 2016). The reason is that usually, the natural environment in a particular place influences the traditional religious beliefs of the people living within that geographical territory. For instance, those living in the riverine or coastal areas in Nigeria mostly believe in the existence of marine spirits. As a result of the environmental crisis, most African traditional religious beliefs, such as animism, totemism, pantheism, metempsychosis, and transmigration are becoming obsolete as the natural environment which inspired these beliefs is being destroyed for housing, commercial and industrial purposes (Betiang *et al.*, 2018).

In the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, most traditional religious beliefs, rites, and rituals have been abandoned as the religious or sacred places and objects of worship, such as sacred streams, rivers, evil forest and shrines of the gods have been degraded or polluted by actors of artisanal crude refining. Some trees which housed the ancestral spirits of the people, and animals that served as totems and mediums through which the practices of metempsychosis and soul transmigration are performed are hard to come by as a result of the environmental pollution caused by artisanal crude refining. Albeit, some people believe that these African traditional religious practices are obsolete because of the advent of Christianity and Islam in the country. The veracity of the matter is that some claim to be adherents of Islam or Christianity but who, in one way or the other, still take part in the traditional religious rites and rituals of the natives even when they claim that the practices are cultural rites.

The practice of artisanal crude refining in the Niger Delta has received ambivalent reactions from different quarters. Some researchers have analysed the socio-economic impacts of artisanal crude refining in the region; others viewed the political and corrupt practices involved and yet another group of scholars has analysed the environmental degradation or pollution it generates. However, no researcher has attempted to analyse the impact of artisanal crude refining on the traditional religious beliefs of the people of the Niger Delta. Therefore, this paper aims at elucidating the impact of artisanal crude refining on the traditional religious beliefs and rites of the people of Niger Delta, precisely the beliefs of the people of Bayelsa and Rivers States. It adopts the analytical method in its investigation. Since the topic centres on the impact of artisanal crude refining on the religious beliefs of the people. The conclusions reached are anthropocentric and not ecocentric.

ECO-SPIRITUALITY AND ECO-THEOLOGY: THE NEXUS BETWEEN RELIGION AND THE ENVIRONMENT

The symbiotic relationship between man and the environment cannot be over-emphasized. As man needs the environment to survive so does the environment need man to survive. Man's relation with his natural environment is a complex one. While he is subject to certain natural controls and events, he also acts as the dominant force in many of the earth's physical and biological systems. The relation has changed with time

(Odum 2004). Before the current epoch of human civilization, ancient men lived in peace with their environment; this was so because they saw nature as the reflection of God and as a connector between divinity and the human race. They did not lay much emphasis on the commercial and economic benefits of nature; rather much emphasis was placed on the spiritual benefits of nature to human beings. However, with the dawn of science and technology, modern human race has placed absolute emphasis on the industrial, economic and commercial benefits of the natural environment while its religious benefits are discarded. This perhaps accounts for the severe environmental crisis in the world, though some scholars in the Western world may think otherwise. The major proponent of this contrary notion is Lynn White.

The terms *Eco-spirituality* and *Eco-theology* found their way into the lexicon of religious studies in the bid to defend the Christian faith against Lynn White's thesis *The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis* (1967). In the aforementioned thesis, Lynn accused the Judeo-Christian religion of being the cause of the environmental degradation in the Western world. He criticised the Christian faith for being anthropocentric (human-centred), he averred that the Judeo-Christian faith claims that God gave man hegemony over the earth but the result of this pre-eminence is the overexploitation of nature by man leading to the issue of environmental degradation. Though, subject to debate, it would not be out of place to say that Lynn White was influenced by the preponderant ideology of the Renaissance epoch. Matthew and David in *The Role of Religion in Environmental Attitudes* (2015) and Mark Morrison et al., in *Religion Does Matter for Climate Change Attitudes and Behaviour* (2015) corroborate Lynn White's assertion. But, this historical analysis provoked those with strong Christian commitments and equally strong environmental concerns to develop an alternative interpretation of the biblical texts, the first two chapters of Genesis, that were the basis of White's allegations (Callicott and Frodeman, 2009).

A plethora of theologians has perceived that the lacuna immanent in Lynn White's thesis is the issue of exegesis or hermeneutics. Therefore, they explained that in the creation account the word 'dominion' simply means stewardship and not hegemony. This presupposes that humans are stewards of nature and not lords over nature. According to Lips-Wiersma and Mills (2014), the Christian Genesis creation stories present two contradictory and contrasting understandings of the human-nature relation. Eco-theology within the academic sphere simply has to do with Christian theologians trying to recast the wrong notion portrayed by Lynn White concerning human-nature relation as enshrined in the Judeo-Christian scripture (Genesis chapter 2). In other words, Eco-theology is simply apologetic of the Christian faith against the wrong notion promoted by Lynn white and other scholars. Conversely, discourse on Eco-spirituality entails the spiritual connection between humans and nature. This connection has nothing to do with religious belief or proof of the existence of a supernatural being. Presently, the discourse on the religious perception of human-nature relation has gone beyond the apologetics of Christian faith against Lynn's thesis to include the significant role of religion in environmental protection and conservation. Myriads of scholars have adumbrated the divergent ways in which traditional religions in the world have contributed to environmental conservation.

Though the role of religion in environmental protection and conservation was ignored in time past, its relevance is only a recent development. Sachdeva (2016) opines that nature is an integral component in many (traditional) religious doctrines. It often

plays a symbolic role, alongside a pragmatic one, as a means to experience the divine as well as survive in a harsh environment. This assertion is further strengthened by Dwivedi (1993) who avers that from the point of view of different world religions, the abuse and exploitation of nature for immediate gain is unjust, immoral and unethical. For example, the Hindus consider the abuse of nature as sacrilegious; Hindu scripture holds that all lives have the same right to existence and humans have no hegemony over other creatures. The Hindus are vehemently forbidden from exploiting nature rather they are admonished to seek peace and live in harmony with nature. The Hindu religious doctrines in which the practices of environmental conservation anchor are *Karma Samsara* (reincarnation) and *Ahimsa* (non-violence) (Rankin 2009). The Hindus believe that after death humans return to life in any form either as human, sentient or non-sentient beings and this explains why Hindu monks are vegetarian. This principle presupposes that every plant and animal is carrying the soul of a human being. In Buddhism, the principle of Karmic Causality and Dependent Origination aptly capture human-nature relation. Lee (2017) explains that the crux of these doctrines is that sentient and non-sentient beings are from the same source and are interdependent, and when nature is neglected and overexploited it will lead to mutual suffering. Buddhism teaches that there is no hierarchical relationship between sentient and non-sentient beings rather a harmonious, happy and mutually beneficial relationship exists.

Myriads of African scholars have analysed the roles of African traditional religions in the conservation of nature. Rim-Rukeh *et al.*, (2013) explained that the basic tenet of African traditional religion and belief system lies in the belief that the abode of the gods and goddesses are located on the rock, streams, pond, trees, land, or anywhere they so desire to live within the community. According to Attuquayefio and Gyampoh (2010), before modern natural conservation methods, traditional Africans operated complex religious and cultural belief systems via norms, myths, taboos, totems and close seasons to preserve, conserve and manage certain natural resources. For instance, those living in Bayelsa and Rivers in the Niger Delta coastal region such as Kalabari, Okrika, Ikwerre, and Ijaw had their ways of conserving their local rivers and streams. Though these natural resources served as sources of livelihood to the people, the streams and rivers were also believed to be the dwelling places of some deities which all have festivals in honour of water spirits sacred to the people.

In Bayelsa State, the water spirits known as *Owuamapu* figures prominently in the Ijaw pantheon (deities). The belief in *Owuamapu* helped the traditional people of Ijaw to conserve their local streams and rivers. Speaking about other religious beliefs and practices that promote the idea of environmental conservation among the people of Bayelsa, Prezi (2015) asserts that it is a taboo to eat Python among the Nembes. And in the Tuomo clan, people do not eat the Iguana (*Abeidi*). Also in Oyiari and Tarakiri, it is a taboo for them to eat the Crocodile (*Egere*) and the Turtle (*Beni-owei*) respectively. The Ijaws see these animals as sacred animals (totems) which deserve respect and reverence. Apart from these animals, there are also forbidden trees that are seen as sacred. These include trees like the *Kunu* and the *Elei* (trees used for carving). The reason is that these trees are either used for carving images of the deities in the shrines or other religious purposes. These traditional religious beliefs are common to all the ethnic groups and tribes that make up the African continent.

ARTISANAL CRUDE REFINING AND THE ENVIRONMENTAL CRISIS IN NIGER DELTA

The Niger Delta region of Nigeria in the contemporary epoch is internationally known for its environmental crisis, resulting from crude exploration activities carried out both by multinational corporations and actors of artisanal crude refineries. But, it was also hitherto known for its rich biodiversity (flora and fauna), the wetlands, the tropical rain forest, the mangroves and the swamps. Speaking of its wetlands, Kadafa (2012) opines that 2.370sq/km of the Niger Delta area consists of rivers, creeks, estuaries and stagnant swamps over approximately 8600sq/km. The Delta mangrove swamps span about 1900sq/km as the largest mangrove swamps in Africa. Analysing the benefits of the mangroves, Kuenzer *et al.*, (2011) avers that the mangrove ecosystems provide various ecological and economical ecosystem services contributing to coastal erosion protection, water filtration, provision of areas for fish and shrimps breeding, provision of building materials and medicinal ingredients, and the attraction of tourists, among many other factors. These natural resources endemic in the region served as sources of livelihood to the people whose preponderant occupations were farming and fishing. But, Emoyan *et al.*, (2008) observed that this ecosystem is under (constant) threat from pollutants generated by a multiplicity of oil and gas related installations, including flow stations, oil wellheads, loading terminals and tank farms.

Though the Niger Delta region is endowed with diverse natural resources, and the crude products derived from this region account for the country's foreign earnings, the level of unemployment and poverty in the region is outrageous. The oil spills from pipelines owned by multinational corporations in the region have rendered the creeks, mangrove swamps and farmlands useless as a result of the environmental degradation as these natural entities were the sources of livelihood of the people. Celestine (2003) asserts that decades of oil exploitation, exploration and production activities in the Niger Delta have led to severe environmental degradation that has created complex problems in the region. Obenade and Amangabara (2014) observed that the resulting oil spills from broken pipelines and waste from tens of thousands of makeshift refineries, combine to produce enormous environmental pollution on land and in the creeks. Most of the physical and chemical qualities of the soil in the Niger Delta are contaminated by petroleum hydrocarbons and heavy metals (Obi *et al.*, 2003; Ilozobhie 2014; Zaria *et al.*, 2019). For instance, the indigenes of Bayelsa hitherto popularly known for fishing have abandoned that activity as most of the streams and rivers are polluted rendering the fishing sector in the state redundant. Statistics show that of all the oil-producing countries in the world Nigeria has the highest volume and records of oil spills. The level of poverty and the issue of unemployment amongst the youth in the region have propelled the people to seek alternative sources of livelihood, such as artisanal crude refining, vandalization of pipelines, and illegal oil bunkering.

Artisanal refining known as bush burning, cooking or *Kpofire* by the locals is a small-scale or subsistent distillation of crude petroleum over a specific range of boiling points, to produce useable products such as Kerosene, fuel, and diesel (Ikanone *et al.*, 2014). This refining method is said to be similar to the process involved in distilling local gins popularly known as *Ogogoro*. Ukponahiusi and Famusudo (2019) observed that majority of artisanal refiners were most times embittered former workers associated with multinational corporations. They, having been trained for distinct tasks

in the oil and gas companies with the promise of employment, turn to artisanal refining with the knowledge possessed when such promises of employment are not kept.

There is a link between pipeline vandalism, oil bunkering and artisanal crude refining, as the latter cannot exist without the rest. There is also a consensus that these inter-related activities have contributed to more pollution in the Niger Delta. The justification for the practice of artisanal crude refining is postulated by actors as a consequence of the social and economic deprivation of the people of Niger Delta of the national cake. Nevertheless, it is imperative to note that the environmental degradation generated from artisanal crude refining is worse than that generated from legal oil exploration activities and the environmental crisis is actually what led to the loss of the sources of livelihood of the people in the first place. Ikanone *et al.*, (2014) assert that though the Niger Delta environment may have already been polluted as a result of the recklessness of major oil companies operating in the area, artisanal refineries, which are unregulated, have exacerbated the pollution with their crude technology. Goodnews and Wordue as quoted by Babatunde (2020, p. 278) posit that:

The illegal and makeshift refineries that are built to refine crude oil to finished products through artisanal refining have all affected the air, water and land around the illegal refineries. Shrinking vegetables and asphyxiation of plants in different parts of the region as well as diminishing arable lands for farming and polluted waters for fishing have all been attributed to artisanal refining.

Though different researchers have examined the practice of artisanal crude refining from diverse perspectives, the general consensus amongst them is that it harms the environment. Obenade and Amangbara (2014) observed that while acknowledging the seeming social and economic advantages that artisanal refining brings to the host communities, and the argument that the practice proffers solution to the problem of unemployment and poverty, especially in the oil-producing areas of the country, the demerits far outweigh the supposed merits both to the community and the environment at large.

Scholars have agreed that the entire processes involved in artisanal crude refining endanger the environment, especially the heating and boiling stage and the emptying of the waste. According to Obenade and Amangbara (2014), the refining process generates a significant amount of waste being dumped in rivers and creeks and on land, while evaporated low fractions pollute the air shed. The major problem as observed by Ogri (2013) is that all known principles of environmental protection in refining crude petroleum are ignored as the illegal refiners empty the residue after boiling the crude into the nearby rivers, creeks, and other water bodies. The high level of fire damage around artisanal refining sites is evidence enough of how highly explosive the practice can be. Analyzing the impact of artisanal crude refining on the environment, Ogri (2013) pointed out that the activities of illegal refineries severely impacted biodiversity, aesthetic scenery of the forest, regeneration of plant species and destruction of wildlife habitat, disruption of the water cycle, and loss of medicinal plant species. From the scientific research carried out by Nwankwoala *et al.*, (2017) on the effect of artisanal refining on water bodies and soil in Okrika and Ogu-Bolo in Rivers the water analysis showed a high concentration of Fe and Zn which made the water in such areas unsuitable for drinking. Also, the soil samples recorded high levels of crude content from 1 m, with concentration reducing with depth up to 3 m. Zaria *et al.*, (2019) assert

that most of the physical and chemical qualities of the soil in the Niger Delta are contaminated by petroleum hydrocarbons and heavy metals. From the report of the United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP) in 2011, it was gathered that the surface water throughout the creeks where artisanal refineries were situated contained hydrocarbons, floating layers of oil that vary from thick black oil to thin oil layers. According to Bebetidoh *et al.*, (2020), the activities of the local crude oil refiners in the Niger Delta region have left the mangrove vegetation, rivers, swamps and estuaries heavily polluted. Speaking on the health risk involved SDN report that the handling and heating of the crude oil pollute the air. The camps have a toxic feel and the health impacts of those working there are unknown. Communities are constantly exposed to inhalation of poisonous gasses, causing coughing and breathing problems. Naanen and Tolani (2014) submit that flares from the local oil refining sites are a major source of air pollution in the Niger Delta region. One of the effects is that it generates acid rain; it stunts the growth of crops and kills both aquatic and terrestrial animals....It has long been known to constitute a serious threat to the livelihoods of the people of host oil communities who are predominantly fishing, farming and trades-people (Ikannone *et al.*, 2014).

Considering the environmental and health hazards that artisanal crude refineries generate, it is highly lugubrious that this phenomenon has come to stay. The reason for this is that artisanal crude refining enterprise is extremely lucrative and is a necessary evil in the South-South region. Obenade and Amangbara (2014) explained that artisanal refining is no longer a community "all-comers affairs" as intending refiners and investors are required to register with unions at prohibitive prices. Youths engaged in the business have become community overlords; rival gangs have sprung up to challenge their structures leading to arms proliferation. Research shows that the demand for products such as Kerosene and Petrol from local refineries is extremely high and some marketers from Lagos and other parts of the country many times patronise these products.

THE IMPACTS OF ARTISANAL CRUDE REFINERIES ON THE CULTURAL AND RELIGIOUS BELIEFS IN NIGER DELTA OIL PRODUCING COMMUNITIES

Human beings are, of course, unique among all animal species. This is unarguably so because humans make use of religion and other forms of culture as their principal means of adapting to the natural environment (Offiong 2011; Azorbo and Ufford-Azorbo, 2019). One remarkable fact about traditional Africans is that their indigenous worldviews and cosmology shape their indigenous environmental ethics and practices (Asadu and Nzuanke, 2014). This is seen in the cultural and religious life of the people of the Niger Delta. Before the modern epoch, there was no clear distinction between the traditional religious beliefs, culture, ethics, and socio-political and economic life of the people of Niger Delta. And their religious beliefs and cultural practices were influenced absolutely by the natural environment. But, in the wake of the influence of Crude oil exploration activities in the region, the synergy that once existed between the traditional people of Niger Delta and the natural environment has been destroyed. One of the consequences of the environmental degradation caused by Artisanal crude refineries in the region is that this industrial activity is posing a serious threat to the traditional methods of conserving the natural environment in the region.

Appiah-Opoku (2007) asserts that since time immemorial, traditional people have established a variety of resources management practices and approaches that continue to exist in tropical Africa, Asia, South America, and other parts of the world. Traditional societies adopted labyrinthine religious and cultural belief systems through norms, myths, taboos, totems, and closed seasons to preserve, conserve and manage certain natural resources (Attuquayefio and Gyampoh, 2010). In addition to the aforementioned practices, other beliefs include metempsychosis, soul transmigration, and reincarnation. These approaches are distinct from the Western idea of parks, zoos, and wild reserves which tend to distance man from nature. There exists a symbiotic relationship between African traditional religious beliefs and the natural environment. In the African ontology though there are hierarchies of beings: God, deities, ancestors, human beings, animals and plant, but, there exists a necessary synergy between these beings. And the notion of the classification of being in terms of value such as intrinsic and instrumental as enshrined in Western ethics does not count in African Environmental Ethics.

Traditional Niger Deltans had a pantheistic view of nature which holds that the abode of the gods and goddesses is located on the rock, streams, pond, trees, land, or anywhere they so desire to live within the community. The veneration of sacred natural phenomenon is a practice that was endemic amongst the people of the Niger Delta in Nigeria. The traditional people of Niger Delta were adherents of African Traditional Religion but it is highly lugubrious that most people from Bayelsa and Rivers States in contemporary time tend to deny this claim stating that they are predominantly Christians. Like other indigenous African ethnic groups, the Ijaw people of Bayelsa and Delta in Niger Delta believe that different spirits are governing the universe because of the manifestation of the powers in the world. These spirits are thought of by the Ijaw people as abstract powers which take on human form. They are immaterial and incorporeal beings (Mangiri and Kquofi 2014). Most of the riverine communities in the Niger Delta believe in the existence of such spirits. This explains why most rivers and lakes in Niger Delta are named after goddesses.

Speaking on the pantheistic view of deities in Ogoni, Saale (2014) asserts that natural environments were under the control of the forces of the wild divinities called *Yor will* goddess of the earth fertility and the *Yor maa* river goddess believed to be responsible for the fortune of fishermen and their activities at sea. In Bayelsa, it is believed that the Adigbe, Esiri, and Akakotokoto lakes in Osiana, Biseni and Igbedi respectively, are the dwelling places of water deities and there are ethical conducts regarding fishing and fetching of water in these lakes. This helps to conserve the lakes. Oviedo *et al.*, (2013) observed that fishing in the lakes by traditional societies involved several rituals and customary observances tied to the traditional belief system, particularly in lakes considered as sacred, as described by elders within these communities. This presupposes that a good harvest from these lakes is dependent on the sacrifices done by the priests of the lakes and also on the benevolence of the deities of the lakes.

Totem is also a common practice in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. According to Rim-Rukeh *et al.*, (2013), in Delta State precisely at Useifrun and Ujevuwu communities in Ughelli South and Udu respectively, the python is regarded as a totem. Ancient legend has it that during inter-tribal wars, the python goes after the people and erases their footprint so that enemies would not identify the pathway of the people. This

is similar to the veneration of Python in Nembe, Bayelsa State. Oral tradition has it that if one of the snakes is killed, burial rites are performed in the same manner as human funeral rites. In Biseni it is a taboo to kill a crocodile because it is a symbol of the goddess of Esibir lake called *Mininema*. In Oyiairi in Bayelsa State, it is also a taboo to eat a crocodile. This belief is also common amongst the people of Talensi in Ghana.

According to Diawuo & Issifu (2015), the Tongo-Tengzuk communities hold the belief that crocodiles are human beings among them. It is therefore a taboo for any Talensi to kill or injure a sacred crocodile. Every Talensi for that matter knows that the crocodiles are the incarnation of their important ancestors. To kill a crocodile is tantamount to killing a human being from amongst them. In the Orogun kingdom in Ughelli Delta State, the reptile, Iguana, is found in a large population and revered. The Iguana is a sacred animal and it is a taboo to kill it (Rim-Rukeh *et al.*, 2013). In Tuomo Bayelsa State, it is also a taboo to kill an Iguana. Generally, all the traditional people of Niger Delta believe in the existence of evil forests and this practice has helped in the conservation of the natural environment. For example, the belief in Ovughere deity amongst the people of Ovu in Ethiope Delta State helped in the conservation of trees and natural entities. The abode of the Ovughere and the shrine of the Ovughere deity are situated within a very thick forest with the presence of such trees as Iroko tree, Mahogany trees, Ogriki and it is a taboo to kill any animal or cut down trees in that forest.

However, the crux of the discourse is, how have the industrial activities of actors of artisanal crude refining hampered the aforementioned religious beliefs of the people of Niger Delta? The paper had earlier stated that artisanal refineries are usually situated in forests, but it is imperative to note that most times these forests are places where reptiles like the Iguana, Crocodile, and Python are found. These aforementioned reptiles are gradually becoming extinct as a result of the environmental pollution caused by artisanal crude refineries. These reptiles were regarded as totems because of the significant roles they played in the history and cosmology of the people. Research shows that a plethora of the mangrove and swamps which were the habitat of these reptiles are covered with waste from crude oil. Apart from crude waste which has destroyed the habitats of these reptiles, actors usually clear a large portion of the area to enable them to set up their necessary types of equipment. During this process, the reptiles are forced to migrate to a different location. The population of the Iguana and Python that was once alarming in some places in Delta and Bayelsa where they are revered is presently dwindling and causing this age-long religious beliefs to become obsolete.

Again, we had earlier mentioned that most communities in the Niger Delta believed in the existence of water spirits (goddesses) and these deities were responsible for the bumper harvest of fish during the fishing seasons. Today, the reverse is the case, myriad of the sacred rivers in the Niger Delta especially in Bayelsa and Rivers are seriously contaminated due to the unregulated activities of actors of artisanal crude refineries in the region. Hitherto, these sacred rivers were the natural habitats of some aquatic animals and there were existing cultural cum religious rules regulating the manner the people make use of the resources from the rivers. This belief is gradually becoming obsolete because these rivers have been desecrated by actors of artisanal crude refineries.

Another area of concern is the impact of artisanal crude refineries on the regatta cultural festival in Nembe. The Nembe regatta is a rich art exhibition piece in a

melodramatic package. One who wishes to learn the basic art of the Nembe people should simply attend a regatta. The Nembe regatta is a cultural document of the Kingdom and deserves to be well harnessed for art and culture learning and enhancement (Angba *et al.*, 2018). The regatta is a game festival that involves canoeing. This festival is done in different parts of the country; it is a big event that attracts tourists from far and near. However, in Nembe, though the festival is still carried out, indigenes find it difficult to practice for the event because some of the rivers have been contaminated as a result of crude waste emptied into the rivers. This crude waste does not only kill aquatic animals in the river it also makes it difficult for people to paddle their canoes.

Lastly, there is also some concern about the hewing of trees in some forests in the Niger Delta. As we have seen, the belief in the existence of spirits amongst the various ethnic groups in the Niger Delta helped in the conservation of trees and plants. The reverse is the case today as some of these sacred trees and forests have been pulled down by actors of artisanal crude refineries to create space for their supposed industry. Some of the trees were used for carving masks to represent water spirits or deities and for carving some deities in the shrines of the priests representing the water spirits. This practice is common amongst the people of Olugbobiri, Nembe, Kalabari, Ibani (Bonny), and Okirika. Enekwe, (1988) as quoted by Mangiri and Kquofi (2014), avers that all the small estuaries and creeks are designated as places where water spirits live and farm. It is these water spirits that are represented in different mask forms. When masks represent idols or deities, they become very powerful and are, therefore, worshipped and consulted as oracles.

CONCLUSION

The practice of artisanal crude refining is and has always been a lucrative venture; it has proffered a solution to the problem of unemployment generally in the Niger Delta region. It also proffered a solution to the problem of scarcity of crude products in the riverine area of the Niger Delta area. Above all, some researchers have pointed out that actors of artisanal crude refining have contributed to the growth of their host communities in terms of providing some basic social amenities such as classroom blocks, bore-holes and electricity. However, the environmental degradation associated with artisanal crude refining activities in the region outweighs the assumed benefits. Most importantly, the environmental degradation generated from artisanal crude refineries has hindered the practice of some cultural and religious beliefs amongst indigenes of the Niger Delta.

This paper advocates for a more eco-friendly method of refining these crude products. It also advocates for a more advanced way of managing the waste from refined crude oil. The paper asserts that if actors of artisanal crude refineries continue their activities without following the laid down environmental laws in the country then, Niger Deltans will lose their identities. The premise for this assertion is that the cultural and religious beliefs of a people are what make them who they are.

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