

Conflict Resolution in South-South Nigeria: A Ceramist's Perspective

John Jonah Umoh

*Department of Fine Arts and
Design, Faculty of Humanities,
University of Port Harcourt*

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Corresponding Author:

John Jonah Umoh

Abstract

The South-South region of Nigeria has gone through serious problems as a result of oil exploration and exploitation by various multinational oil companies. One of these problems is the high level of unemployment as a result of environmental degradation caused by oil spillage, gas flaring and fire disasters. These have destroyed the people's means of livelihood as farmers, fishermen and traders who have been thrown into abject poverty. This has brought a series of conflicts to the region. The youths and women on several occasions have tried to register their feelings through protests but are always met with Police confrontation and brutality which sometimes claim lives. Some jobless youths of the area in annoyance and frustration have taken to drug abuse and various crimes such as armed robbery, kidnapping, cybercrimes, illegal oil refining, oil bunkering and so on which has caused the region more harm than good. This paper proposes ceramics, the art and science of fired clay as a means of self-expression, a universal means of communication and recreation as a creative and peaceful means of resolving conflicts between states, communities, the people and the oil companies and the government through art exhibitions, art fares, workshops and conferences. It will enlighten the indigenes that they can vent their anger and frustrations through art and also resolve conflicts in cordial and artistic ways without loss of life and property. This approach will attract economic gains through patronage and support from the Government and Non- Governmental Organizations (NGOs) while the same message of marginalization, deprivation, oppression, environmental degradation, poverty et cetera are being sent. It is expected that the indigenes of the region will acquire the necessary skills and take to ceramics practice to peacefully and aesthetically communicate to resolve conflicts and empower themselves out of poverty.

Background to the Study

The area of Art known as Ceramics is the art and science of baked clay. It is the use of clay with or without other materials to create objects which are subjected to thermal heat treatment for permanency. Man is gifted to observe, imagine, imitate and create that which is not provided by nature. These art forms carry contents or messages which they communicate with the culture and the people. The word, art, therefore, is life and life are art and environment. Diakparome (1993) sees art as “a reflection of the characteristics of the life, habits and beliefs of a people”. Art is the way man thinks, dresses, speaks, sings, dances, walks and so on. There can be no art without people and there can be no people without art. It is a perfect way of doing things, a means of expression and a universal language. Ceramics has been practised in the South-south region of Nigeria for a very long time to produce wares for aesthetics and instrumental use. This geopolitical zone has experienced more harm than good as a result of oil exploration and exploitation activities. The air, water and land have been polluted as a result of the activities of the oil-producing companies. The region has been neglected, marginalized, and deprived and the indigenes left in abject poverty. There have been a series of conflicts within the area over the years as a result of injustice done to the zone. The wealth of the nation is derived from the zone yet the zone has been left, undeveloped. There have been agitations, restiveness, protests, armed robbery, kidnapping, illegal refining of crude oil, attacks on oil installations and oil bunkering which add to the conflict in the zone that needs to be resolved. The indigenes on several occasions have tried to make their voice heard but this has always resulted in confrontation with a special squad of the Police and Army, which usually results in the loss of lives and properties. Ceramics as a means of self-expression and communication stands out as a medium through which the region can speak, shout and cry out through exhibitions, conferences, workshops and fares to resolve conflicts and save their lives and the environment without any confrontation with the government which remains the judge in her case.

Aim and Objectives

This paper aims to project pottery as a means of conflict resolution in the South-south region of Nigeria. The objectives, therefore, are to identify the causes of conflict in the region, to examine the level of pottery practice, uses and demand in the region, to explore the possibility of engaging the youths and women in pottery practice and to explore the possibility of resolving conflict through pottery practice.

Literature Review

Data gathered from both primary and secondary sources assisted the review of related literature to this paper.

Theoretical Framework

This work is anchored on the Marxist Political Economy Framework which views society as a product of conflicts rooted mainly in class inequalities and exploitative relationships between the powerful rich and the powerless poor. The theory deals with the issues of oppression, exploitation, poverty and resistance. It follows that as the wretchedness of

the worker increases, his antagonism, real and potential to the capitalist system particularly to the bourgeoisie class tends to increase. The issues of conflict resolution in the South-south region of Nigeria are based on the fact that there is exploration, exploitation, environmental degradation, deprivation, oppression and poverty meted upon the large powerless poor by the few powerful rich which results in resistance and conflicts in the region. Haven identified this, the writer presents pottery as a means of resolving conflicts in the region without the destruction of life and property.

Causes of Conflict in the South-South Region of Nigeria

The South-south region is one of the six geopolitical zones in Nigeria and part of the areas known as the Niger Delta and Oil Producing Area. Since the discovery of crude oil in the area many decades ago, there has been a series of conflicts between the region and the federal government. The causes of the conflict have always been resource control, derivation formula, oil spillage and clean-up neglect, marginalization, deprivation and compensation, to mention but a few. Cornett (2009), defined conflict as “warfare between opposing forces, especially a prolonged and bitter but sporadic struggle”. He added that “it is a disagreement or clash between ideas, principles or people”. The situation in the South-south region of Nigeria has been a prolonged disagreement between the region and the Federal Government right from the year, 1956 when crude oil was struck in the region.

Before the discovery of oil in the Oloibiri community in the present Bayelsa State, the wealth of the nation was from agriculture. The groundnut pyramid from the North, cocoa from the West and palm produce from the East. These regions were allowed full control of their resources on which they remitted the tax to the Federal Government. For this reason, every region was very diligent with the necessary support from the central government whose wealth solely depended on this agricultural produce. However, things turned around immediately after crude oil was discovered in the Niger Delta region. The Federal Government suddenly took full control of the exploration and exploitation activities in the region and gave stipends as derivation benefits to the oil-producing states against what was obtainable during the groundnut- cocoa-palm produce era. On the other hand, solid minerals in other states, especially in the northern part of the country are controlled by those states.

It is worthy to state here that since Lagos was the federal capital city and the then seat of power, the multinational oil companies were made to establish their head offices there. This of course did not augur well with the Niger Delta region as non-indigenes were employed as permanent members of staff and sent down as “expatriates” to recruit the indigenes as casual workers with very low pay and can be laid off at any time with or without any form of compensation. Perhaps in a way to rule the region easily, it has to be subjected to abject poverty and underdevelopment. The Government introduced the divide-and-rule system of ruling into the region by settling the elites with contracts to employ their children as casual workers and second-class citizens for the oil-producing companies. To make ends meet, some highly-connected indigenes have been sponsored

by the central government to go home and disagree with their kinsmen who are seen to be firm on resource control, derivation formula and justice. A typical example of this took place during the military regime of late General Sani Abacha which led to the execution of the "Ogoni-nine" led by the Human Right Activist, late Mr Ken Saro- Wiwa on the tenth day of November 1995.

Furthermore, there has been permanent pollution and environmental degradation in the area as a result of oil exploration and exploitation activities in the area. This has led to the deterioration of the natural environment, including the atmosphere, bodies of water, soil and forest which has destroyed the ecosystem thereby rendering the indigenes who are predominantly farmers, fishermen and traders jobless and poor.

Indeed, the oil installations that have been in use since the discovery of crude oil have become obsolete which results in frequent explosions and its resultant devastating effects on the host communities. What is worrisome is that whenever this happens, the national government and the oil companies call it vandalization and blame it on the indigenes and therefore do little or nothing to address the situation while the host communities suffer. A typical example of this is the oil spillage in Ogoniland and gas flaring which the government has done little or nothing to clean up the land and stop the flaring. It is a thing of great concern that a special agency of government, the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC), charged with the responsibility of overseeing the business of oil exploration and exploitation has been taken over by corruption without accountability because the key officers are always not from the oil-producing states.

The list of the causes of conflict in the South-south zone and indeed, the Niger Delta region is endless and all boils down to injustice. Over the years, indigenes of the area as state governors, elder statesmen, traditional rulers, youths and women groups, and members of state and national assemblies had done so much to resolve the outstanding issues amicably but all to no avail. Maybe they have not done enough but tread with caution so as not to bite the northern fingers that feed them. This has given rise to agitations, restiveness, protests, attacks on oil facilities, cultism, drug abuse, assassinations, oil bunkering, illegal oil refining, kidnapping and other forms of criminality. On several occasions, the indigenes have taken to the streets to register their disagreement with the policies and position of the government but met with fierce confrontation by the joint task force of the police and the military which is usually disastrous.

Federal Government Measures to Resolve the Conflict in the Region

In an attempt to resolve the conflict between the Federal Government and the region, a lot of measures have been put in place, but the big question is; has the government been sincere enough to allow these measures to yield the expected result and can the government as the major beneficiary from the injustice and a judge in this conflict allow justice to prevail ?. It is worthy of mention here again that the Federal Government has introduced several measures, some of them include the establishment of the Oil Mineral

Producing Areas Development Commission (OMPADEC) in 1993 with the responsibility of developing the area. In the year, 2000, President Olusegun Obasanjo established the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC), to replace OMPADEC with better performance. In 2007, the Amnesty Program was introduced by President Shehu Musa Yar-Adua, to pull out the angry youths from the creeks to surrender their weapons and embrace peace while they were given stipends and sent to study and acquire skills that would make them useful in society. In the year, 2008, the Ministry for Niger Delta Affairs (MNDA) was created by his successor, President Goodluck Ebele Johnathan, an indigene of the area and the first in that capacity, with a mandate to oversee and enhance the performance of NDDC. Due to the continuous struggle for justice in the nation, President Goodluck Johnathan, in March 2014 convened the National Conference to discuss the state of the nation and to chart the way forward. Another worrisome issue is the recent revelation by the Honorable Minister of Niger Delta Affairs, Senator Godswill Akpabio before the National Assembly during the NDDC probe in July 2021. He revealed that about ninety per cent of the total amount released yearly by the Federal Government for the development of the region always goes to members of the National Assembly who pick up contracts, get paid, and enrich themselves as the few powerful rich groups at the expense of the large powerless poor group of the region, thus they either abandon the projects or deliver substandard projects.

The government on several occasions has sent a joint task force of the armed forces into the creeks to deal with the criminals and to create a peaceful environment that guarantees oil drilling activity at its full capacity. Unfortunately, the members of the joint task force end up as oil merchants by providing security to the oil bunkering and illegal refining businesses in addition to other crimes. Despite all these measures and many more, it appears, they all died at birth because the central government always gave her unjust verdicts even before the commencement of the programs. The big question is, what then is the potter's perspective of conflict resolution in the South-south zone of Nigeria?

Pottery as a Means of Conflict Resolution

Since a lot has been put in place to resolve the lingering conflicts in the region, and it is glaring that the Federal Government is not ready to grant justice to the region, it is the position of this paper therefore that the indigenes should retreat and re-strategize to stop further loss of life and property. Pottery as art can serve as a vent for frustration and anger, a means for recreation, entertainment, communication, economic empowerment and poverty alleviation. According to Ekanem (2000), "Art is a product of the capabilities of the artist on the one hand and the environment on the other". In this way, Udoakah (2000), said that "art is a vehicle through which creativity finds expression..., it can be seen, touched, felt, read, interpreted, experienced and appreciated". Ochigbo (2000) opined that "art is an expression of an urge which creates order and the order is created through a very special effort of the artist". When an artist skillfully manipulates his given materials with the visual elements of design, guided by the principles of organization to create a work of art, he speaks through the work of art to his public. Akpan, E. and Etuk, U. (2000), said that "art is concerned with sublimity grandeur, loveliness, charm,

neatness, appeal, glamour, perfection, sharpness, refinement and gorgeousness among others". This means that art can give joy, peace, pleasure and satisfaction by taking away frustration, anger and conflict from society.

This paper is concerned with the visual art that creates tangible forms which send out codes that are decoded differently by the perceivers who derive joy, relaxation and information from the works of art. Gilbert (1998), said that "art has to do with communication. If a good idea were all it took to be a great artist, everyone would be a great artist". This means that the world is full of people who are carrying around in their heads, splendid ideas for poetry, novel, operas, paintings, sculpture, ceramics and architecture but what is lacking is for these ideas to be realised in their expressive form which is essential to any work of visual art. In other words, people move about with content but the artist creates the form that carries the content as the subject of communication.

In connection with conflict resolution, the Alberta University in Canada in collaboration with the Faculty of Humanities, University of Port Harcourt organized an international conference, poetry and musical concert and art exhibition in May 2018 on Life, Literature and Environment to honour a Poet, an indigene of the area, Professor Tanure Ojaide at sixty. The conference brought together great artists of theatre and film studies, poetry, music, literary art and the visual arts to write, read, sing, dance, act and create a common language to peacefully resolve the conflict in the Niger Delta region.

Ceramics has remained a non-verbal, universal language of communication. It follows that if language is a means or medium through which human beings communicate among themselves, then ceramics is one. Chukueggu (2000), opined that the non-verbal signal of communication is the art in everyone's life that makes communication more interesting as meanings are brought out and shared more effectively. Ceramics is an area of art which simply means, baked clay and the form from the beginning has served as a good source of information and a universal means of communication. According to Ajayi (1976), "archaeology without pot-shard is unthinkable". This is supported by Harvey (1976) who said that "some of the most reliable information comes from pottery remains because it is durable and therefore carried information that reflected the lives and cultures of the people who made them". It is the information gathered from inanimate things such as ancient art pieces like sculpture, paintings and ceramics that remain our most tangible evidence that the old human past existed. The ancient cave paintings, the Egyptian hieroglyphs, the Rosetta stone discovered in 1799, the Chinese, Japanese, Hebrews, Indian, Arabic and the Nsibidi writing of the Ekpe cult of the Efik-Ibibio are all art signs and symbols used for communication.

Ceramic pieces have been used by artists to speak with the public. Artists draw inspiration from their respective cultures and daily occurrences of national and international interests and interpret the same in several ways. The works so created apart from communicating with the observers or public, preserve the information or content

for even generations yet unborn. Contemporary issues such as cancer, AIDS, insurgence, Polio, environmental degradation, disability, oppression, poverty, terrorism, and COVID-19 to mention but a few are expressed through the skilful manipulation of clay and rendered permanent by firing. A ceramic piece serves as a universal means of communication because the form and the message sent out are understood by everyone irrespective of his or her nationality and level of education.

In the South-south zone of Nigeria, the artists have been drawing inspirations and themes, contents or messages from the polluted and degraded environment to express themselves on issues of injustice, marginalization, deprivation, and environmental degradation such as water, soil and air pollution and so on. According to Edewor (2016), "the Niger Delta environment has continued to be in one news much for adverse social vices due to petroleum oil exploration, exploitation and maladministration of oil wealth within the local and national circles". Nelson Edewor, Bruce Onobrakpeya, Pamela Cyril-Egware, and many other visual artists from the region have developed signs and symbols and many others have used the Nsibidi signs to pass messages to the public on contemporary burning issues.

Umoh (2010), in his art exhibitions, presented ceramic wares titled, "Peace at last Fig. 1, ii" "A little love" Fig. 2 and "Safety" Fig. 3 which spoke clearly of reshaping war sword into farm implement, appreciating the disabled persons in our society and safety precautions against AIDS respectively. These ceramic wares were used to tell stories of many texts and were appreciated by many who would not have had time (or know-how) to read.

Ceramics or pottery is one area of art that needs very little equipment to take off provided the major material, clay is available as it is abundant in the South-South zone. The youths should be encouraged to set up cottage industries to produce ceramic wares. This will not only empower them economically but will produce the much-needed ceramic wares and employment opportunities for the jobless in the region to keep them away from agitation, protest and criminality. When the indigenes are well engaged in meaningful ventures, it will create cordial fora to interact with those in the position of authority to resolve the conflict in South-South and indeed, the Niger Delta region without further loss of life and property.

Fig. 1: Peace at last
Artist: Umoh J. J.
Year: 2009





Fig. 2: A little love
Artist: Umoh J. J.
Year: 2009
Fig. 2 and "Safety



Fig. 3: Safety
Artist: Umoh J. J.
Year: 2009

Conclusion

Ceramics as an area of art has been in the business of producing forms which have contents to speak to perceivers. Though its forms have been mainly for instrumental uses, self-expression, promotion and preservation of culture and a universal language, it can be used to foster conflict resolution in the South-South region. In a highly polluted and degraded region where there are no job vacancies for the youths who have taken to agitation, violence and protest to air their view on the issue of injustice, ceramics practice remains one of the most effective means of communication to resolve the conflicts. Pottery wares are in high demand in homes, schools, fashion and building industries et cetera, therefore anyone who ventures into ceramic practice is empowered enough to be an employer of labour and to express himself creatively through art exhibitions, art fares, workshops and conferences without violence which leads to loss of life and property. A good start and a steady development with frequent and proper outings will attract the government functionaries, non-governmental organizations, the general public and the international community to peaceful interactions which will eventually lead to the long-expected conflict resolution in the area.

Recommendations

1. The indigenes of the region especially, the youths should be encouraged to acquire the necessary skills to keep themselves busy producing ceramic wares.
2. The government at the state and local government levels should grant free interest and soft loans to the indigenes to establish cottage industries.
3. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs), churches and wealthy indigenes should establish ceramics centres, and train and engage interested indigenes.
4. Workshops and conferences should be organized to share ideas on how to improve upon the practice and to cordially interact with the public on how to resolve conflict in the region.

5. Art exhibitions and fares should be sponsored to cordially and creatively interact with the Government and society on the burning issues in the region.
6. Government should make necessary laws to protect indigenous potters from imported products such as enamel, plastic and pottery wares.

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