

## Paradise and Paradoh the Need for Eco-Cultural Rejuvenation in Nigeria's Niger Delta Region: An Exposition of Timipre-Willis-Amah's Photographs

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### Abstract

This paper is a discourse of the Eco-cultural and Rejuvenation of the Niger Delta using the medium of photography. Engaging a narrative that combines a historical sketch of colonial and postcolonial readings of a perennial power play in Tekena M. Tamuno's Oil Wars in the Niger Delta 1849-2000. The book connects the three temporal dimensions: a lived past, an actual present and an anticipated future upon which, socio-cultural and political discourses are determined. Pictorial images, therefore, assume a symbolic micro-sum to evaluate and transmit what characterizes the cultural memory of the postcolonial Niger Delta region of Nigeria; and how the vision Timi Amah records in photography repositioning the future of Nigeria's Niger Delta region. Photographic image's role in documenting historical timelines offer mediation and its power to either engender positive actions or to react to issues it addresses, remain one of its lasting qualities. The connection between the artist-photographer and the future photographer's work calls attention in visual metaphors become a route to negotiate the future.

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## Background to the Study

Of primary focus in this essay is what invariably amounts to the seeming irredeemable environmental disaster in the Niger Delta. Its clusters of illegal crude oil bunkering by the locals in the artisanal refining industries, commonly referred to as “*Kpo-fire*”, constitute a huge environmental challenge. To complement our evidence are photographic documentaries on artisanal refineries by Amah of pristine waterfronts and coastlines of the same region. The foundational query is how and in what contexts can word give life to photographic documentation of Timipre Willis Amah of distinct phases of the ecological state of the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. Hitherto the narrative had been the reverse. The story had always been about how the multinational oil cooperations collude with the government of Nigeria to rape and degrade the Niger Delta ecosystem and dehumanise its populace.

Timipre Willis Amah's body of work, the focus of this paper; concentrates on an inverse rape now carried out by the indigenous peoples in the area. Amah confers an activist dimension to his photographic oeuvre as he frames the severely damaged ecosystem in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. A particular emphasis of Amah's photographic practice is his attentiveness to environmental degradation from the processes and procedures involved in the local refining factories. Some of Amah's photographs also include landscapes that could pass for paradise. While such photographic scenes are real, they, in a way, accentuate a particular ideal to be longed for, placed side by side with a degraded ecosystem. These paradise images serve as pointers to the rapid change in the transformation of a vibrant ecosystem to one of rabid degradation. Amah's nativity, Nembe in Nembe Local Government Area in Bayelsa State, Nigeria, is one of the heartlands of civil disobedience, leading to some wanton environmental disasters in the region's history. The sensitivity Amah exhibits as a documentary photographer locate him in the vanguard group that has consistently kicked against the pressures put on the environment in the Niger Delta region. His strategy upholds the sanity of the area. His photographs are tacit regarding sustained environmental abuse.

The task of this essay, thus, is to appreciate these pictures in the context of documenting and lending words to Amah's work on the abandonment of environmental ethics in the Niger Delta. We engage prospective thinking to develop robust strategies to positively reposition the Niger Delta region's parlous state. This objective is, in spite of the prevailing narratives that blame the government of Nigeria for whatever the local people are currently engaged in, as documented by Amah. Hence, in the first instance, we shall evaluate the photographs of Amah and the contexts they narrate; and, secondly, consider the power relations, institutions, and agents that define their content and context. Trailing the above concerns is a narrative that combines a historical sketch of colonial and postcolonial readings of a perennial power play in Tekena N. Tamuno's book the *Oil Wars in the Niger Delta: 1849-2009*. The book connects the three temporal dimensions of a lived past, an actual present, and an anticipated future upon which socio-cultural and political discourses are determined. Our response, therefore, is from the point of view that Amah's photographs possess the potential for cultural memory and mnemonic imaginations.

Thus, Amah's pictures assume a symbolic microcosm to evaluate and transmit what characterizes the cultural memory of the postcolonial Niger Delta region of Nigeria and how the vision he recorded informs repositioning the future of Nigeria's Niger Delta region.

The Niger Delta is the most extensive wetlands in Africa and the third largest in the world. It covers an area of about 70,000m; and consists of a variety of zones: sandy coastal ridge barrier, brackish or saline mangroves, fresh water, permanent and seasonal swamp, and truncated inland rain forest. It is a complex and fragile system of wetlands and drylands of which the 20,000m are seasonally flooded zones, tidal and marsh areas. This variegated ecosystem is laden with crude, whose exploration and non-regard for the environment that hosts them had become a grimly fitting synonym for the region. Following the discovery of crude oil, massive environmental issues and ethical conflicts have constituted challenges arising from the exploration activities by multinational oil corporations. Over the years, complaints and agitations by the local people have metamorphosed into a sustained wave of militant activities and brigandage. A consequence of unheeded complaints and protests by the people of the region eventually has given rise to a cruel twist loaded with irony. The area now experiences a continued proliferation of artisanal refineries dotting its landscape, particularly on the river banks.

### **Telling the Tale**

Figure 1 shows a rainforest ecosystem with dense tropical forest vegetation comprised of hardwood species and lush foliage. The scene defines an area that is not swampy. The winding body of water remains typical of the deltaic regions. The foreground of the photograph is familiar with the lazy-winding journey of rivers as they approach their emptying destination, the ocean. The many turns this river takes are faintly visible in the background-end of the photograph. However, prominent in the picture, regardless of the forest and its winding body of water, are patches of deforested land areas dominated by black.



**Figure 1:** An Aerial View of a Sacked Artisanal Refinery Campsite © Timi Amah

Colours and solo-standing trees by the bank of the river defined by white beach sands. The spread of the coverings suggests that the small-scale refining trade in crude oil thrived on this sport and had left its devastating impact on this typically lush vegetation, as attested to by the surrounding dense forests.

Scenes of this nature, devoid of refining activities, result from the sacking of the refinery site by government agents who check and control nefarious activities in the region, especially crude theft and the activities of the artisanal refiners. According to the law, small-scale refiners constitute economic saboteurs to the nation only. Hence, wherever they are located within the oil belt region, the task force's responsibility to close down such sites remains sacrosanct. This is despite the procedures it employs that further compromise environmental standards. Their approach is considered an exacerbation and economic sabotage as they burn down the equipment and infrastructure, store or refined petroleum products within the place, and expel the personnel. By engaging such tactics towards sanitising the activities of the saboteurs in the region, they end up compounding the multiple incidences of ecological disasters in the area. Figures 1b and 1c are details from figure 1. Figure 1a focuses on a burnt refining pot with projections of two distillation pipes at a destroyed site. In contrast, figure 1b captures carbon-laden smoke from probably other active areas of artisanal refineries within a proximate environment.



**Figure 1a:** A Section of the Sacked Campsite with a Destroyed Distilling Unit © Timi Amah



**Figure 1b:** Close-up of the Destroyed -Campsite and a sooty background © Timi Amah



**Figure 1c:** Close-up of the Destroyed Campsite © Timi Amah



**Figure 1d:** An Oil Spillage within the Destroyed Refining) Factory © Timi Amah

The economic sense in the method the government taskforce applies in taming the anti-economic activities again has grave negative implications for the environment. Figure 1d is a heavily polluted water body because of such a sack (a closeup from figure 1c). This scene probably is a body of stagnant water. Stagnant oil bodies of this nature may suggest incidences of advanced decay with apparent crusty surfaces revealing residues of a damaged environment and a decomposing oil arising from the activities of bacteria. In situations of this kind, as suggested by experts in bioremediation of polluted soils and water bodies, there is an apparent deficiency of oxygen, hence a rapid depreciation of the surrounding aquatic life and culture. Notice that the dark shades cast on the upper segment of this picture and some fallen vegetable materials have suffered severe burns that now render them lifeless. On the other hand, where spills occur on flowing water like a river or stream, as documented in figures 2a, b, and c, a colour gradation occurs in the visual quality and impact of the water body that results in diverse variations beginning from the location of spillage, which shows a dense brown colouration at the immediate site of the spill. The flowing water gradually thins out this mass of spilt oil which accounts for the variations in the colour of the waterbody. However, spills usually occur at the site of illegal crude oil extraction for artisanal refining.

According to Amah, such sites record as much as six inches thick deposits of spilt oil on water. Accumulated spills amount to enormous economic loss and the accompanying consequences resulting from the pollution of the environment and along the stretch of the river. The resulting devastation remains imagined. The complexities and challenges arising from the oil spillage along kilometres of the water stretch in the region remain frightening. The extent of spillage in the environment occurs with the transportation of stolen crude; figure 3 shows plastic barrels floating in the river. The picture shows a usual mode of transporting crude oil without the safety procedures required for such activities. Dozens of barrels laden with crude oil are left floating in the river and guided to the refinery site, compromising the safety of the water. Characterising river tributaries and creeks in the Niger Delta is their dark colouration. In the instance of the above photograph, the golden brown colour indicates that these barrels of oil are close to the crude oil source.



**Figure 2a & 2b:** Oil Spillage on a Flowing Waterbody © Timi Amah



**Figure 3:** Transportation Mode of Illegally Sourced Crude Oil to Refining Sites © Timi Amah

The crude oil at the refinery site (figure 4) is a large dugout pit divided into small segments and laminated with cellophane sheets stretched over wooden frames. The segmentation

in the picture is convenient units relative to the size of the pit. The components, in turn, are interconnected with a plastic hose – wooden frameworks placed on the top of the hole function as braces for covering during the rains. Figure 5a is a storage facility in a sacked refinery. This storage facility exhibits evidence of deliberate spillage of its content.



**Figure 4 & 4a:** Dugout Storage Facilities are laminated with Cellophane protective linings.  
© Timi Amah

The documentation, above, narrates an aspect of one of the greatest human calamities in the Niger Delta region perpetrated by its indigenous populace. The unprecedented devastation portrayed in the pictures and the accompanying narrative reinforce a fundamental concern for the future of the Niger Delta region. Placed side by side with the history of spillage and associated challenges to the Niger Delta environment since the discovery of crude oil, the activities of the refiners in the small industries remain unprecedented. Before this time, the delicate fluvial habitat had become damaged to the extent where restoration of the environment was considered herculean. 'It has been estimated that between 9 million to 13 million barrels have been spilt since oil drilling started in 1958.<sup>15</sup> and between 2003 and 2007, a record of 1,150 abandoned oil site spills was also noted by Nigeria's National Oil Spill Detection and Response Agency in January



2008.<sup>6</sup> The period in question accounts for an upsurge in illegal oil bunkering and the rise in artisanal refinery activities and soot released into the atmosphere. The ecological situation in the region regarding the continued proliferation of artisanal factories dotting the whole landscape remains vengeful. The spread establishes the failure of the government to assuage the sufferings of the natives regarding the unsafe living conditions from severe ecological disasters and the utter destruction of their environment. A pertinent question is; who is hurt further by this resentful act? Figures 5a & b show how oil slicks continue to stifle this delicate fluvial habitation.



**Figure 5a and 5b:** Scorched vegetation from Crude Oil Pollution © Timi Amah



**Figure 5a and 5b:** Scorched vegetation from Crude Oil Pollution © Timi Amah

Any raging inferno did not hurt the plants above. The simple means of obtaining crude oil for the local refinery's massive oil deposits and in the waterways is responsible for the vegetation's health.

The crude oil so acquired has a terminal point in the refining environment. Figure 6a is an evening scene in a local factory where crude oil is refined into mainly three products: kerosine, petrol, and diesel. The heat intensity required to distill crude oil into the components thus mentioned is enormous. It impacts the palm trees within close range to it such that they have all lost their greens and are left hanging down as dried palm fronds. The intense energy a refining process needs, as figure 6b shows, remains fatal to the ecology. Hydrocarbon fumes as soot emerg from the cooking chamber escaping into the air, unchanneled, to hitherto unsafe enclosures. Aside from the papable environmental disaster recorded in figure 6b, the refining factories constitute a complex ecological tragedy. The process of obtaining refining products in these local plants remains trapped in the crudest technologies available for such procedures.



**Figure 6a:** Illumine Evening in a Refinery Factory © Timi Amah

Figures 7 and 8 show that waterfronts in the Niger Delta can be serene and peaceful, with a flurry of activities from relaxation and commerce.



**Figure 7:** Waterfront © Timi Amah



**Figure 8:** Waterfront Jetty © Timi Amah

### **Closing Remarks**

The works in this paper capture a tapestry of the socio-cultural life and several events of the people of the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. The environment's inhabitants live with the apparent dangers of the polluted environment. The life expectancy in the region provided in a study presented by Georgewill in 2012 shows a prevalence of debilitating health conditions in the area Amah documented. These conditions sound like a death knell considering the future of the population. The link to the past in contemporary exigencies is to examine the failures in the Niger Delta's abandonment of ecological ethics. This paper, in fact, coheres with the bid to maximise the area's inherent cultural benefits to foster endogenous development models. The role of the photographic image in documenting historical timelines, offering mediations, and its power to engender positive actions or react to issues it addresses remain one of its lasting qualities. Thus, in this essay, a connection between the role of the artist-photographer, the environment, and the future of the photographer's work calls attention to in visual metaphors becomes a route to negotiate the future. Indeed, the artist in this context is one, who, through the revelations of his metaphors, fits into the role of the hermeneut and acts accordingly. Considering the timeline of the contemporary photographs, they offer unethical revelations concerning the ecosystem of the Niger Delta.

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