THE IMPACT OF URBANIZATION ON THE CULTURE OF THE NIGER DELTA IJAW

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Abstract
A people are who they are because of their culture, and their culture is defined primarily by their environments. Changes to the people's environment might necessarily translate to changes in the people s culture. Whether such changes affect the people's way of life positively or negatively is dependent on the form and magnitude of the changes taking place. Urbanization in recent years has become an accepted global phenomenon of change as populations grow and societies develop and modernize with the world fast becoming a 'global village'. It is a phenomenon that is impacting on the lives and cultures of various people across the world. This essay is aimed at investigating the impact of urbanization on the culture of the Ijaw people in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria. To achieve the aims of the paper, a brief incursion was made into the origins and culture of the Ijaw people. The paper also investigated contributory factors to urbanization in the Niger Delta region and how its consequences impacted on the culture of the people. It is therefore revealed that urbanization has become a major source of cultural erosion which if not stemmed, will annihilate the unique cultural heritage of the Ijaw people which will lead to a loss of their cultural identity.

Keywords: Urbanization, Niger delta, Ijaw, factors, effects, people's culture

Introduction

Culture is a dynamic continuum in the existence of any group of people because the people are shaped by their culture. Culture as has been severally and popularly defined by various scholars is 'the sum total of the way of life evolved by a people in their bid to meet the challenges of living in their environments'. John Scott and Gordon Marshall aver that: 'culture is all that in human society which is socially, rather than biologically transmitted' (2005:133). By Scott and Marshal's assertion, culture is a learned, shared process which is passed from one generation to the next. , This invariably means that different people, according to the peculiarities of their environments, produce cultures distinctly different from those of their neighbours. These unique cultures of different people are ultimately affected by various factors as societies grow and develop.

Urbanization is a product of modernization and industrialization which has spread to most parts of Nigeria and has affected the traditional way of life of the people who have become part of the urbanization process. The Ijaw people of the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, in their evolutionary processes have been greatly influenced by westernization and modernization indices. This has in

turn engendered alterations in their cultural formations. To ascertain the impact of urbanization on the culture of the Ijaw people of the Niger Delta, the study will source materials from already existing literature. It also rely on oral interviews. The work is divided into three broad categories that examines the concept of urbanization, the Ijaws as a people and the impact of urbanization on their culture.

The Niger Delta Region

The Niger Delta region of Nigeria is a coastal wetland located in the southern parts of Nigeria. On account of political delineations, the Niger Delta Region presently forms part of what is today known as the South-South geopolitical zone of Nigeria. This 'zone' is further subdivided into south-west, south-east and south-central Delta. The States that make up the Niger Delta have in recent years become a topic of discourse. While one school of thought holds that the Niger Delta is made up of nine states, namely: Abia, Akwa-Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross-Rivers, Delta, Edo,. Imo, Ondo and Rivers States, a second school of thought maintains that the Niger Delta is naturally comprised of six States, namely: Akwa-Ibom, Bayelsa, Delta, Edo, Ondo and Rivers States.

The basis of the first group's argument can be located in the Niger Delta Development Commission's (NDDC) definition of the Niger Delta States. The NDDC, a federal body commissioned to oversee commensurate development in the region, beamed its searchlight on the nine oil producing states in the southern parts of the nation and gave all nine states the nomenclature of Niger Delta States. The latter group declaims NDDC's definition as being erroneous, claiming that the nine states as oil producing southern states does not accord them the status of being actual Niger Delta States. This group of scholars, base their own argument on natural geographical coastal delineations of the states in the southern parts of the nation (Ibaba S. Ibaba 2005, Benedict Binebai 2010; Preye Inekoba & Imua, D. 2010; Ebiegberi Alagoa 1999). Since the debate about the states that make up the Region is not the essence of this paper, we will concentrate our efforts on our focus namely, the Ijaw people who collectively constitute the predominant ethnic group in the Region. They are located mainly in Bayelsa, Delta and Rivers States. They can also be found in the coastal parts of Akwa-Ibom, Cross-Rivers, Edo and Ondo States.

Origins and Cultures of the Ijaw People of the Niger Delta

The people known today as the Ijaws located within the Niger Delta region of the country have a history that dates back to about 7000 years. Their history closely linked with that of the Yoruba, Edo and Igbo people of Nigeria, Narratives of scholars of Ijaw history trace the migrational patterns of the people with varying opinions. Some scholars claim that the people migrated from a district around the Nupe province. Others argue that they originated from old Benin Kingdom. Yet others argue lhat they came from Sudan, or Egypt or South Africa. The most popularly accepted historical account of the origin of the Ijaws, which is also a convenient departure point, is the account that avers that the Ijaws are direct descendants of Oduduwa and their ancestral home is Ife (Welson Alazigha [no date]:l; Ijaw Foundation 2012:1).

In colonial documents, Ijaws are referred to as ORU people. (Ijaw Foundation 2). The term Ijaw is the anglicized version of Ijo, Izon, Ejon, Ezon, Ejo, Ojo, Ujon, Ujon, Uzon (The Ijaw nation).

The varying but synonymous nomenclatures by which the people are known will be used interchangeably in the course of this study as they all refer to the same group of people.

Ijaw, according to Alazigha's historical account, was one of the sons of Oduduwa. He was a warrior of valour who fought wars side by side with his father and contributed immensely to their numerous battle victories. The account has it that, at some point, father and son had an altercation which led to Ijaw and some of his followers leaving their ancestral home. Their resettlement journey from old Ife, took them through old Benin Kingdom, as they migrated down the River Niger through the Forcados Creek, Ofoni-Toru and the Igbedi Creek before finally arriving at Agadagba-Bou located in the southern parts of present day Bayelsa State where they settled. In the course of their migration however, some of his followers detached themselves from the group to settle in some of the places they passed through, hence the Benin theory of origin (Alazigha 1-2).

Worthy of note is the fact that in the course of their search for a permanent place to settle, Ijaw and his band of followers always made transit camps along the banks of the River Niger before finally settling down in Agadagba-Bou. While the Ijaws can be found in concentrated populations in Bayelsa, Delta and Rivers States, many Ijaws are natives of Akwa-Ibom, Cross-Rivers, Edo and Ondo States. They can also be found as migrant fishermen in Fishing Camps in Sierra-Leone to as far as Gabon. As dispersed as they seem as a people, they are traditionally always close to the banks of seas, rivers and creeks in all their locations (Wikipedia 2012:1).

Economic Activities: Because of their affinity with rivers, every facet of their existence is influenced by the sea. For example, the primary economic occupation of the Ijaw people are fishing and farming. Their farming culture is determined by their environment which is dominantly a water-logged terrain. The kinds of crops the people produce are those that can survive in the environment. Their crops include: Sweet Potatoes, Plantains, Coco-Yams, Paddy-Rice, Water-Yams, Guavas, Pine-Apples and Bush-Mangoes. The Ijaws also engage in other economic activities like lumber-jacking, canoe-carving and distilling alcoholic spirits sourced from palm-wine. With the incursion of Europeans into their part of the country, the Ijaw people gained employment in the Merchant Shipping sector of the Nigerian Economy in the early and mid twentieth centuries. In contemporary times, the Ijaw people can be found employed in the Civil Service as well as other public and private sectors. With the advent of the Oil and Gas sector, the Ijaws also found gainful employment in the sector (Wikipedia 2).

Language: a people's culture is perpetuated primarily through their language. It is a distinct aspect of their culture and the quintessence of their corporate existence. Everything that makes a people who they are is embodied in their language. The Ijaw people speak nine closely related Niger-Congo languages which belong to the Ijoid branch of the Niger-Congo language tree (Wikipedia 2012:2; E.E. Efere & Kay Williamson 1999:95-7).

Belief Systems: In contemporary times, the Ijaws are predominantly Christians with the Catholic and Anglican denominations prevalent amongst them. While other denominations of the Christian faith have been embraced by the people, some have also embraced Islam. However, the people have not totally forsaken their traditional religious practices. Many Ijaws still believe in, worship and supplicate to traditional deities. The traditional belief system of the people

revolves round one Supreme Being, variously known as: Teme-arau, Woyingi, Tamuno, Oyin, Aziba, Izibe and Ayiba. The Supreme Being, according to Okaba and Appah (1999) is:

> a god(sic) who lives in the sky. She is woman because it is women who bear and produce. Her presence and interest in the world is not as great as that of the spirits. She has no shrines, fetishes or priests. Her assistance in times of great need, can be invoked however, by prayer and her protection is procurable if white chalk is rubbed on the forehead [of the supplicant] and then blown from the palms of the hand upwards into the air (151).

From the above, the Supreme Being, Temearau is depicted as a goddess distant from the day-to-day religiosity of her creatures. This, in the Ijaw worldview is the norm as faithful do not go directly before the presence of their god. The people believe in and worship a myriad of lesser deities through whom their supplications are borne to Temearau. A broad categorization of the lesser deities and channels of seeking Temearau's attention, assistance and benevolence are: Bou-Oru (Forest Spirits), Beni-Oru (Marine-Spirits) and Egbesu (Arch-Divinities) (Okaba & Appah 1999:151). Essentially, while many Ijaws have converted to the new religions, there are those who tenuously hold on to the traditional religions and beliefs of their ancestors (Benjamin Okaba & S.T.K. Appah 1999:149-50).

Political Institutions: leadership is culture determined and in times past, the Ijaws had two kinds of leadership structure depending on the location of the people. Most eastern Ijo people had their leadership enshrined in the War-Canoe House System, while western Ijos had leadership by Gerontocracy with political and religious authority vested on the Ama-okosu-owei (the oldest man in the community). In both systems, there were Councils of Chiefs who, in conjunction with the clan head, administer the communities with dedication and commitment to serve to ensure the growth, development and peaceful co-existence of all in the community.

Costumes: costumes are a vital cultural identity marker of a people and the Izon people of the Niger Delta have a unique costume culture which has been evolving as their civilization grow to become more sophisticated. The traditional costumes of the Ijo man are: *Etibo* on top of a broad rectangular piece of cloth (wrapper) in the olden days, then it evolved into *Etibo* over trousers, with the wrapper reserved for ceremonial occasions. Male costumes were, and still are complemented with hats, walking sticks, coral neck and wrist beads. In contemporary times, the men adorn coral beads, gold or silver plated studs and cuff-links. The women are usually attired in blouse, over which are tied one over the other, two broad rectangular pieces of cloth known as 'two wrappers'. This costume is completed with a 'big head-tie', accessorized with coral beads around the neck, wrists and fingers. Costumes for both men and women can, depending on the occasion, be either simply or elaborately designed (Mrs Bernadette Overe-Pee 2012).

Cuisine: every ethnic group in Nigeria has particular dishes that are inalienably associated with them. Most of these dishes are determined and produced by the environment the people live in. The Ijaws are surrounded by vast bodies of water-fresh and salty water, depending on the geography of the people. Ijaws on the east of the Delta have salt water, while those to the west of the Delta have fresh water. The vegetation of the Ijo topography is lush and swampy with

mangroves in most of the salt water areas. The heavy rains and swampy nature of the area allows for only certain crops to grow. Some of those crops had been earlier enumerated.

Traditional delicacies of the Ijaws include: *Pulu-fiyai* (Palm-oil Soup), *Keke-fiyai* (Plantain pottage), *Okodo* (Plantain Peppersoup), *Oguru-fiyai* (Palm-Kernel Soup), *Opuru-Fulo* (Prawn Soup). Each of these soups can be eaten with either *Osun* (Starch) *Eba* or *Foofoo,* There is also *Egina-Beni* (peppersoup) that can be eaten with *Gbarahn Ofoniyai* (Fried Farina) or white rice Local beverages of the people include: Okokodia-wuru (coconut drink), Izon-wuru (Palmwine) and Kon-wuru (locally distilled gin).

By their very nature, the various components that make up the ijaw cuisine are organic and highly nutritious. Plantain is rich in iron, starch is carbhohydrate, Ofoniya is fiber, Opuru (prawn), Endi (fish), Edemefu (crayfish), Bou-Nama (bush-meat), Osi (snail) and many other sea-foods are rich in protein. All these classes of Ijaw foods are as sumptuous as they are nutritious. (Bayelsa State Council for Arts and Culture 2011).

Concept of Urbanization

The concept of urbanization is no longer nouvelle. It has become an accepted part of man's existence and like any other sphere of academic endeavour, urbanization has been garnering a variety of definitions. For instance, Das Ram Nayara (1997), defines urbanization as 'the growth in the size of cities, the number of cities and the proportion of the population living in urban locations' 140). For Wikipedta, 'it is the physical growth of urban areas as a result of rural migration into cities particularly the largest cities' (2012:1). Misbahu Bulmuo defines urbanization as 'the movement of people from communities concerned chiefly or solely with agriculture, to other communities generally larger, whose activities are primarily centered on government, trade, manufacture or allied interests' (Bulmuo 2012:1). As a result of such rural urban migration, there is an increasing proportion of population residing in urban, rather than in rural areas.

'Urbanization has its roots in Renaissance sixteenth century when Turkish assaults on Christian faithfuls resulted in movement of Christians from the east to western European countries. As a result, trade grew and European cities along the coast developed greatly. The advent of the Industrial Revolution gave urbanization a further boost (Anonymous 2012:3). John Scott and Gordon Marshal's account of the history of urbanization goes back to the middle ages, as according to them, 'in the middle ages, the expansion of long distance trade and mercantile capitalism stimulated the growth of major European cities (2005:681) which invariably gave rise to urbanization. However, whatever the location of the origin of the concept of urbanization, it cannot be disputed that at one time in the history of man's existence, mass-movements by groups of persons where made from one location to another in search of better opportunities for self survival, provision, safety and shelter.

Eventually, this drift spread to other parts of the world, and was recorded to have gained momentum in Africa in the twentieth century when African nations got independence from their colonial rulers.

The article 'Urbanization since Independence' (2012) traces the Nigerian rural-urban drift to the 1970s with its assertion that 'with the era of the oil boom, improved roads and ready availability

of vehicular transportation, people started drifting to urban centers. Urbanization, asserts Wikipedia, is a direct result of modernization, industrialization and rationalization (Wikipedia 2012:1). According to the same source, 'as more and more people leave villages to live in the cities, urban cities result. This kind of growth, it avers, is especially commonplace in developing countries (Wikipedia 2012:1).

Factors and Impacts of Urbanization in Societies

Urbanization occurs when people move from rural communities to settle in urban centres because there is a general perception that resources are more concentrated in urban centers, which give people expectations of improved living standards. It therefore stands to reason that there will be influxes of people into urban centres for the following reasons:

i. improved job opportunities, education, housing, transportation, healthcare, proximity, and diversity of markets, goods, services and other infrastructural facilities which urban dwellers have access to;
ii. Efficient administration of cities and easy to access to supply of basic amenities like water, and electricity;
iii. Advanced living conditions in cities make communication, transportation and road networks more readily available;
iv. People of many castes, religions and culture have to work together in cities, which creates better understanding of each other, and help in breaking down socio-cultural barriers thereby fostering social integration;
v. The general belief that cost of living in urban areas is reduced (Urbanization- Impacts 2012: 1-5).

While some urban migrants relocate to urban centres voluntarily, some rural dwellers are forced to relocate out of necessity. Below are some economic, social and environmental reasons which drive some rural dwellers to make the move to urban areas:

i. When local farmers become victims of unpredictable weather conditions such as drought and floods which adversely affect their livelihood, they are forced to relocate to cities in search of greener pastures;
ii. Loss and/or degradation of farmland and pasturelands owing to development, pollution, conflict or the effects of development or globalization which can lead to weaker parties losing or forfeiting their lands;
iii. The attraction and anonymity of hedonistic pleasures of urban areas, proximity as well as the opportunity to assert one's individuality lures some to urban centers;
iv. The opportunity to develop, seek out and belong to social communities pull some to cities;
v. Cities offer a larger variety of services that are not always found in rural areas;
vi. Some persons even the elderly may be forced to relocate to cities where there are adequate health care systems and personnel to attend to their health needs (Wikipedia 2012:5)

Whatever the reasons, it is clear that masses of people regularly migrate to urban cities in search of better living standards. The mass movements into urban areas gradually created its own peculiar challenges as the swelling urban population outgrew existing facilities with the resultant effect that:

i. Congestion on existing facilities, infrastructures, amenities and services like transportation, healthcare, power supply, education, recreational centers and water supply became major urban challenges;
ii. available jobs could no longer go round all the urban migrants and in the bid to survive, crime rate increases;
iii. sewage, industrial and domestic waste disposals became huge problems in urban center management;
iv. The cities became polluted with various micro chemical substances which are toxic to the health of the populace;
v. And because of the overflow of people in city centers, these places become difficult to administer and manage;
vi. Poor environmental and accommodation conditions led to the evolution and upsurge of slum dwellings;
vii. Urbanization also has severely caused human values to be relegated to the backseat in the day-to-day affairs of men ((Wikipedia 2012:5; Urbanization 2012:2, Misbahu 1).

Impact of Urbanization on the I jaw Culture

Urbanization greatly affects the cultural heritage of any given people. The Ijaws as earlier discussed are a people with a robust and dynamic cultural heritage. Owing to their initial and continued interactions with Europeans, the Ijaws were business-minded seafaring people, who long before the concept of Nigerian rural urban migration was traced to the oil boom era of the 1970s, had been leaving the shores of their native communities in search of greener pastures. However, with the discovery of Oil in commercial quantity: constant communal conflicts which sometimes leave whole communities being razed to the ground, leaving men, women and children homeless; negative effects of Oil exploring and exploiting activities leading to farmlands being forfeited to oil prospecting companies to do business; incessant oil spills that pollute the rivers and creeks destroying aquatic life, end up rendering fishermen and farmers without their main source of livelihood; These and other factors contributed to the migration of the Ijaws to urban cities.

In the process of the rural urban drift, more and more people, especially those within the productive age range, move away from the villages to resettle in cities, leaving behind the aged, weak and infants who constitute the dependent group of people. With these migrations, population of urban centers swell while that of rural communities dwindle. The people left behind must necessarily ensure the survival and continuity of life in the rural areas, as they expectantly await the seasonal visits of kith and kin who relocated to cities.

The groups of people who seek greener pastures in urban centers live and work with people from cultural orientations different from their own and with time, Ijaw migrants in urban cities begin to assimilate dominant cultural practices prevalent in the areas where they spend the most part of their working years. Owing to British presence in the history of Nigeria, a considerable number of Nigerian cities became Europeanized. In such cities, core values, cultures and traditions of the people living and working there become subordinated to the impersonal individualistic, sterile way of life that was bequeathed to Nigeria by the British at independence.

Arising from the fact also that various people come together from diverse cultures, indigenous practices unique to the different people begin to disappear, and be replaced with westernized cultures. This acculturation gradually becomes part of the ways of urban dwellers and when they 'visit' home, they take with them the foreign cultural elements they had imbibed from the cities. These alien cultural elements in time began to punctuate traditional practices of the rural communities.

The cultural practices of the Ijaws, in their bid to accommodate the foreign cultural elements brought back home by urban dwellers during visits, have been undergoing changes that have been impacting on their cultures. Modernization, globalization and consequent urbanization is gradually obliterating the people's indigenous Ijo language. Most modern Izon parents dwelling in urban cities do not teach their children to speak the indigenous language. Such urban-city born children grow up speaking a foreign language- English, which on account of British colonialism, has become the official language of communication at home, in school, at play, in places of worship and in other formal social gatherings. The consequence of this linguistic dislocation is that the rich indigenous oral culture of the Izon people has become endangered.

Africans are by nature a communal people, who care for, and support one another, sharing in each other's life experiences, living together in close proximity of each other and following up on each other's wellbeing. The frenzy, suspicions, danger and fear that pervade city life have insidiously crept into and adulterated the African value of 'Be your brother's keeper' among the Ijaws. The people are jettisoning the culture of communality and imbibing the individualistic nuclear relationship living patterns that were once alien to the culture of the people. The indigenous extended family linkage system is fast becoming an aspect in the people's history. Typically in Ijo communities in times past, houses were built with mud and thatch. In present times, brick houses are springing up and with that phenomenon springs up status symbols of affluence. The bigger the houses, the more opulent the owners, the less likely they are to have interactions with those who do not belong to their 'class'.

The Izon people of the Niger Delta Region have a unique costume culture which has been evolving even as the Izon society is becoming more sophisticated. Contemporary costume trends of the Ijaws, are changing. Traditional blouses, two wrappers and head-ties, are giving way to western styled gowns, suits, skirts and blouses, while the men now dress in shirts and trousers, the younger generations are perennially attired in the popular costume culture of jeans, shirts and T.shirts. Consistent adorning of western attires resulted in contemporary Izon woman's inability to expertly adorn the traditional two wrappers and head-tie (Diseye Fiebai 2012).

Christianity, urbanization and the assimilation of foreign religious doctrines have led many Ijaws to abandon their traditional religious practices, while some persons are caught in between the worship of both foreign and traditional religions.

The effects of urbanization's fast 'junk' foods and other convenient un-Nigerian foods that have become the popular food choices of many urbanized family homes, has impacted negatively on some Ijo people as they can no longer prepare the traditional delicacies of their native communities. Consequently, majority of the new generation of the Ijaw children who cannot in the first instance pronounce the names of some of their local dishes may not get to know or eat

some foods native to their ancestral lands in the course of their fives (Bayelsa State Council for Arts and Culture 2011).

Urbanization has undermined the political structure of traditional leadership, respect for elders and constituted authority, has been eroded, some clan heads now administer the affairs of their communities from urban cities where they have taken up residences. The fact that a traditional ruler can rule from outside the walls of his kingdom is but one sign of the changing dynamics of tradition. In ages gone by, it was unimaginable for a ruler to take a step outside the boundaries of his kingdom.

Conclusion

Westernization, modernization, globalization and urbanization have transformed primitive man to sophisticated, highly technical intellectual being who constantly seek new ways to improve the living conditions of the human race, there is no debating that. However, in localizing the world into a global village, individual communities are being subsumed into the collective global village. In globalizing the local, individual community cultures that define the various peoples of the world, their independent identities as autonomous groups of people are becoming threatened. Urbanization's impact on the culture of the Niger Delta Ijaw is an insidious infiltration of the people's culture. The people are gradually losing their identity as an autonomous people they can hardly sustain or promote their cultural heritage, they are losing control all the cultural markers that identify them as people.

To avert the total obliteration of the Ijo culture, concerted efforts must be made by the states, local governments, traditional leaders, all stakeholders and individuals in and outside the Region to reverse the rapidly dying indigenous culture of the people. Indigenous edifying Izon cultures should not be allowed to be swept away by the tide of urbanization and globalization.

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Oral Interviews

i. Mrs. Bernadette Overe-Pee, A retired Ijo federal Civil Servant from Patani in Delta State, August 20, 2012.\
ii. Ms Diseye Fiebai, an Ijo fashion Designer from Odi in Bayelsa State August 26, 2012