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CURBING THE BLACK SOOT MENACE IN RIVERS STATE: THE COMMUNITY THEATRE OPTION

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Abstract

Rivers State is among the oil producing states in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. The illegal crude oil activities in the region has led to incessant black soot pollution. The black soot menace is one of the hazardous challenges facing the residents and environs of Rivers State in recent times. This petro-chemical hazard has constituted environmental and health diseases. Its negative consequences have attracted the government, non-governmental organizations, and well-meaning individuals to advocate for sensitization and eradication of the menace. It is therefore on the foregoing that it becomes imperative to advocate for the use of community theatre practice as an option in the control, sensitization, mobilization, and stoppage of the black soot menace in Rivers State. The work employed mixed research methodology (qualitative and quantitative), analytical and sociological

approach. This paper reveals that indiscriminate burning of petro-chemical substances (plastic materials etc.) and illegal oil refinery activities are among the major causes of black soot pollution in the state. Also the work reveals that the black soot menace and its consequences are examples of man's uncontrolled desire to amass wealth at all cost. Therefore, it is the modest recommendation of this paper that adequate policy control and its corresponding sanctions be put in place to checkmate illegal crude oil refinery operators from polluting the environment. Likewise, the paper recommends that community theatre troupes (performances) be encouraged to sensitize and educate those involved in illegal oil refining; about the damages and its consequences to humanity.

Keywords: Community Theatre, Drama, Menace, Black Soot, and Rivers State.

Introduction

There is no doubt to say that Rivers State of Nigeria is one of the largest producers of crude oil that sustains and enhances the economic growth of the Nigerian nation. This natural endowment (crude oil) has attracted multinational companies (Shell Petroleum, AGIP among others) to invest in the state and thus raise the revenue bar of the state and the nation in general. The large quantity of drilled crude oil in Nigeria spurred the Federal Government to establish refinery companies at strategic locations in Nigeria (Rivers State, Kaduna and Warri, etc.). These refineries are charged with the task to refine crude oil to international acceptability and distribute the same to the consumption of the populace. Unfortunately, the refinery companies became non-functional and the availability of refined petroleum products

becomes relatively scarce.

It was observed that human and material factors were responsible for the non-functional and collapse of the government-established crude oil refinery companies. The human factor is the inability to control and manage the day-to-day administration of the companies as a result of gross corruption and policy ineffectiveness. Similarly, the lack of maintenance culture to the equipment and other material resources of the co-operation pushed the refineries to their comatose states. The resultant effect of the above factors led the Nigerian government to seek alternative refinery companies elsewhere. In this direction, the government deemed it fit to send (sell) the crude oil abroad for refining and subsequently returned finished products to the country for consumption. However, this situation contributes to inflation and other economic challenges. It is on this note that the need for the establishment of modular refineries was advocated for by some Nigerians towards making petroleum products available to the country. Revealing the nature and characteristics of a modular refinery, Ibikunle *et al* (2016) contends that:

A modular refinery is a refinery whose parts or equipment are constructed in modules designed to be easily transported quickly and easily anywhere in the world and comes in a variety of sizes with capacities that range from 500 to 30,000 barrels per day. They are

thus considered to be mini refineries (p. 5).

Due to economic hardship, the quest for survival and the need for resource control some persons are lured into activities of illegal crude oil refining (popularly called *Kpo fire*). It is gathered that the illegal crude oil refinery activities constitute the major factor in the cases of black soot menace in Rivers State. “Black soot is a black particulate matter made up of carbon and results from the incomplete combustion of fossil fuels” (<https://www.vanguardngr.com>). Corroborating the above assertion, Elem (2021) reveals that “black soot is a type of air pollutant...As a pollutant, it comprises a variety of other pollutants like chemical acids, metals, and dust particles. By its nature, it can take the form of a solid, liquid, or gaseous state. Ordinarily, soot is a type of product of burning fossil fuels like oil refining and smokes from vehicles.” (p. 10). The activities of illicit crude oil theft and refining have not only constituted environmental hazards but mental health problems to the people of Rivers State in particular and the Niger Delta region in general. This socio-economic disturbance becomes a deliberate concern to the government and the people of the region towards curbing the black soot menace. It is on this backdrop that this paper thinks deeply and critically advocates for the use of community theatre practice as an option to eradicate the black soot menace through its mobilization, sensitization, entertainment, education and other informative instruments.

Rivers State: An Oil Producing State in Panorama

Rivers State is one of the 36 states that makes up the Nigerian nation. It was created in 1967 and has recorded sufficient discovery of crude oil and thus, adjudged as one of the largest oil-producing states in Nigeria. It, therefore, suffices to highlight that crude oil mineral resources have a strong deposit in Rivers State and its environs. This natural endowment has lured multinational oil companies such as Shell Petroleum Development Companies (SPDC) among others to embark on intensive oil exploration in the state towards discovering more and expanding the frontiers of oil exploration in the areas.

In 1956, in Oloibiri, in the present Bayelsa State (old Rivers State), crude oil was found in larger qualities by Shell Petroleum Development Company (SPDC). According to Steyn (2009), “the oil exploration activities of SPDC yielded dividends in 1956 as it discovered oil in commercial quantities at Oloibiri (situated 72km west of Port Harcourt City)”. Oloibiri is located in Bayelsa State of Nigeria. Recall that Bayelsa State was created out of Rivers State in October 1996. The two states were once together as a state, before the discovery of commercial crude oil by SPDC in 1956 in Oloibiri. Informing further of the activities and subsequent discovery of crude oil in other parts of Rivers State by SPDC, it was claimed that “this breakthrough was to be consolidated with the discovery of a second oil field Afam (40km east of Port Harcourt). The production of oil from these oil fields which

reached 5,000 barrels per day by 1958 ushered Nigeria into global oil scene as an oil producer" (Steyn 2009; Duru 2014, researchgate.net).

Since the premier discovery of crude oil in large-scale quantity in Oloibiri in the present Bayelsa State, almost all the ethnic nationalities in Rivers State have functional oil wells (fields) that contribute to economic growth of the state and the Nigerian nation in general. Sadly, the “golden gooses” that laid “the golden eggs” have been neglected and abandoned. Ikuomola and Okunola lament that “irrespective of the facts, these communities are the proverbial hen that lay the golden eggs which oil the Nigerian economy” (2012, p. 175). In this direction, most of the oil producing communities have suffered deprivation in the hands of the government and oil companies. Narrating the ordeals of some host communities, Ann Godwin writes:

Oil-producing communities in Egi Clan in Ogbia/Egbema/Ndoni council of Rivers State, have urged the Federal Government not to neglect them in the new board of the Niger Delta Development Company (NDDC). The communities regretted that despite their rich natural resources, which have contributed largely to the nation's economy, they have been neglected over the years, suffered abject poverty, serious devastation and pollution. (www.guardian.ng)

Naturally, a state that is endowed with mineral resources such as

crude oil that sustains the socio-economic growth of a nation should be adequately rewarded in both infrastructural, socio-economic, educational, and human capital developments. Paradoxically “oil producing communities in Nigeria are faced with myriads of problems. Characteristically they are underdeveloped, relatively far from government presence and modernity ways of living” (Ikuomola and Okunola, 2012, p. 175) This reckless abandonment has resulted in the need for resources control which somewhat led to militancy and armed struggle in Rivers State in particular and Niger Delta region in general. *A Human Rights Watch Briefing Paper February 2005 Summary* reveals that:

On September 27, 2004, the leader of a powerful armed group threatened to launch an "all-out war" in the Niger Delta -- sending shock waves through the oil industry -- unless the federal government ceded greater control of the region's vast oil resources to the Ijaw people, the majority tribe in the Niger Delta. The threat, made by Alhaji Dokubo Asari, leader of the Niger Delta People's Volunteer Force (NDPVF), followed the deployment of federal government troops to quell months of intense fighting between the NDPVF and a rival armed group, the Niger Delta Vigilante (NDV), led by Ateke T o m .

(<https://reliefweb.int/report/nigeria/violence>)

In summary, the resultant effects of oil exploration and exploitation and its negative consequences, constitute a deliberate intention of this paper to ask for adequate compensation, socio-economic and infrastructural development of Rivers State as one of the formidable oil producing states in Nigeria that has launched the nation into a global map.

The Geographical Location of Rivers State

Rivers state is located in the heart of the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. It was among the states that were created in May, 1967. Kari informs that “Rivers State, sometimes simply referred to as Rivers is one of the 36 states of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. It was created in 27 May, 1967. The state is located in the southern part of Nigeria and has a population of 5,198,716 million people (National Population Commission, 2006)” ([researchgate.net](https://www.researchgate.net)). Rivers State has 23 Local Government Areas and Headquarters. They are: Abua-Odual (Abua), Ahoada East (Ahoada), Ahoada West (Akinma), Akuku-Toru (Abonnema), Andoni (Ngo), Asari-Toru (Buguma), Bonny (Bonny), Degema (Degema), Eleme (Nchia), Emohua (Emohua). Others are: Etche (Okehi), Gokana (Kpor), Ikwerre (Isiokpo), Khana (Bori), Obio/Akpor (Rumuodumaya), Ogbag/Egbema/Ndoni (Omuku), Ogu Bolo (Ogu), Okrika (Okrika), Omumma (Eberi), Opobo/Nkoro (Opobo), Oyigbo (Afam), Port Harcourt (Port Harcourt), Tai (Saakpenwa). Rivers State is bounded by Imo State on the North,

Abia State on the East, and Bayelsa State on the West. It has a large quantity of crude oil minerals, fertile agricultural land and rich aquatic vegetation. These enviable natural endowments brought the state to the limelight as the treasure base of the nation.

Curbing Black Soot Menace: The Community Theatre Option

Theatrical performances all over the world have been proven to have far-reaching benefits to the people and the environment. Through the graphical presentation and re-enactment of human actions and activities on stage, the audience easily assimilates and comprehends the message. Therefore when issues of societal concerns are raised, theatre becomes a ready vehicle of transportation to the target audience. This paper hopes that issues concerning the black soot in Rivers State can be tackled forthwith through the instrumentality of community theatre practice. This is because, “it is a practice of using theatre as an agency for development and education in a given community predicated on highly participatory methodologies” (Diang and Kebaya, n.d., p. 3). No doubt “Community theatre is an instrument for sensitization and mobilization” (Inyang and Bassey, 2017, p.149). Community theatre is a strong organ of a community that passes message across to the people through dramatic performances with the purpose of stimulating or causing awareness by revealing problems and situations. Buttressing this point (Inyang and Bassey, 2017) further state that “theatre is increasingly becoming a predominant tool for sensitization and mobilization of local

communities for economic, political and environmental development” (p.149).

The role of theatre in the development of the people and environment cannot be glossed over. This is because theatre presents man in action. The actions and inactions of man are reflections of the social environment and thus are most times craftily woven into dramatic action for the delight of the target audience. Supporting the need for environmental plays (Community Theatre), Inyang and Bassey emphasize thus “the purpose of an environmental play like any good play, is to entertain, raise awareness and influence attitude change in ways that should elicit the intended response from the target audience” (p.151). The foregoing assertion encourages the practice and promotion of community theatre as a catalyst for mobilization and awareness in a given community. Therefore, given the issue of black soot menace, community theatre remains an option of propagation, sensitization and eradication of the socio-environmental diseases in Rivers State. Commenting on the need to organize groups into community theatre practice as a methodology in tackling social problems in the society, Dianga and Kebaya inform that:

Community Theatre is viewed as the drama of, by, and for a community that appropriates artistic practices for its...desires, which are not always in accordance with those of

mainstream Applied Theatre practice. It is a practice of using theatre as an agency for development and education in a given community predicated on highly participatory methodologies (n.d, p.3).

Nonetheless, the dramatic presentation of the social problems to the people, theatrical performances give immediate graphic impression on them. This is why drama remains a tool in the hands of dramatist to stimulate action and cause social change. Revealing the nature of drama, Okoh (2007) contends that:

From the Greek word 'drama', simply means action. It is an imitative action in the sense that it is a re-enactment of human actions. The concept of mimesis or imitation is crucial to the core meaning of drama. Drama is also a method of expression for the playwright, who tries to give order and clarity to human experience (p. 21).

As a method of expression, dramatic activities are conveyed through the thematic impulse (message) presented in the theatre. Most often, the concept of drama and theatre are used interchangeably. For the purpose of clarity, Ohiri defines the concept of theatre thus:

The word 'theatre' is derived from the Greek word "theatron" which

means “a place for seeing”. In this sense, it has been said to be describing an architectural structure built to house dramatic offerings and, or other types of presentations (p. 2).

Supporting the opinion of Ohiri, Krama is of the views that:

Theatre is not only the building but the presentation of artistic forms for edification and entertainment. The theatre is the most objective of arts since it presents both outer and inner experience through speech and action (p. 1).

Drama from its classical beginning and to the contemporary era is targeted at mirroring the society. It becomes therefore the glass prism where human activities are x-rayed. This claim tallies and supports the position of Krama (2006) that drama has the responsibility to examine human activities in the society for the purpose of edification. To this end, community theatre (drama) will not only serve as an entertainment resort to the people of Rivers State but an option to solving the black soot menace in the state.

Functions and Benefits of Community Theatre:

Community theatre sensitizes the people about issues, ideas, policies, problems and other happenings in the community through theatrical performances:

(1) It serves as an entertainment resort: Entertainment is one of

the focuses of community theatre in a given society. Through entertainment, the people enjoy and relax after their daily activities. Issues of concern such as the black soot menace among others can be enacted and presented before the audience for evaluation, analysis, judgment and awareness.

(2) It creates enlightenment for the people: Community theatre practice engages the people's sensibility as it informs and creates understanding in the minds of the people. Through the instrumentality of community theatre, those involved in crude oil theft and refining may know about the consequences of their action and inaction. Similarly, community theatre practice helps in relating government policies and plans to the people. No doubt, the presentation of government programmes and policies into theatrical performances bridges the gap between the government and the people.

Benefits:

- (1) Community theatre practice creates self-confidence to the practitioners (performers). It gives them the brevity, assertion and popularity in the society.
- (2) It serves as the voice of the people in the community. Community theatre is a socio-cultural institution that promotes the well-being of the community; thus serves as an identity.
- (3) Community theatre creates awareness of the activities and happenings in society. Through the instrumentality of

community theatre, follies are exposed and condemned.

(4) It serves as an organ of socialization. The practice of community theatre creates social interaction between the artistes and audience. The constant interaction amongst the community people through the theatrical performances enhances social action and behavioural change in the lives of the people.

(5) Apart from social interaction, community theatre practice also creates income to the practitioners and revenue for the community in general. When money is raised/realized from the theatre, actors and other participants are paid. Similarly, sponsorship of the theatre either by government, well-meaning individuals or cooperate bodies enhance development to the people and most times, creates revenue.

Causes of Black Soot Menace in Rivers State

The danger of black soot pollution in Rivers State is in alarming proportion. This results in health hazard and environmental impacts on the people of the state. The unhealthy activities of man in encouraging illegal crude oil refineries have been attributed to the major causes of black soot in Rivers State. According to the *Vanguard newspaper* “the Federal Government said that the soot, currently being experienced in Port Harcourt and its environs, was caused by activities of illegal refiners, bunkers and burning of tyres” (*Vanguardngr.com*, 2018). The source further states that “in

Port Harcourt, there are over 100 abattoirs and many of these abattoirs use rubber tyres to roast animals while others burn them to extract copper wires" (*vanguardngr.com*, 2008). Similarly, it is claimed that heating of asphalt for road construction and destruction of stolen petroleum products by burning contribute to the soot problem in Rivers State.



Destroyed Illegal Crude Oil Refining Site



Pictorial Evidence of Black Soot

The Involvement of Security Agents in Illegal Oil Bunkery in Rivers State

In a bid to checkmate the excesses of crude oil bunkers in Rivers State and Niger Delta region in general, Government constituted a Joint Task Force (JTF) which comprises of various security outfits such as the Nigeria Navy, Air Force, Army, Civil Defense and

Police. Their mandate is to monitor, control and prevent crude oil theft and pipeline vandalism among others. Unfortunately, however, some of the notorious and deviant security personnel engaged in aiding and abating the activities of illegal crude oil refiners for personal gains. Ukpong (2022) reports that “the Governor of Rivers State, Nyesom Wike, has accused security agencies of aiding, abetting and protecting illegal refineries in Rivers State” (<https://www.premiumtimesng.com>). According to *Transparency International Defence and Security Centre*, “some JTF members are complicit in, and often benefit from, precisely the pursuit they mandated to eradicate the illicit oil industry” (2019, p.1).



Illegal Crude Oil Refinery Sites



The Governor of Rivers State of Nigeria, Ezebunwo Nyesom Wike in a statewide broadcast on the 10th January, 2022 condemned the illegal Crude Oil Refinery Activities in Rivers State.

The Involvement of Community Leaders in Illegal Crude Oil Theft and Refining

Like the sharp practices carried out by the security agents in the shady illegal oil activities, some of the community leaders (local authorities) are not left out of the criminal activity in their respective communities. This is because some of the 'bad eggs' indulge in the illegal crude oil refinery. Their aim may not be unconnected to criminal sabotage but outright greed for gratification. Most times, they connive with the security agents to perpetuate their acts. Put bluntly, the consequent effects of their inordinate action led to black soot, loss of revenue to government and sometime, death as a result of 'Kpo fire' activities.



Pictorial Evidence of Crude Oil Sabotage in Rivers State



Site of Illegal Crude Oil Refinery Fire Outbreak in Imo State

Loss of Revenue to the State and Federal Government

It is a statement of fact that crude oil resources are the major source of revenue to Rivers State and the Federal Government of Nigeria. In this wise, states that are gifted with crude oil such as Rivers State and others are rewarded adequately from the sale and proceeds of crude oil. However, the theft of crude oil and its subsequent illegal refinery constitute great economic sabotage and thus reduce the

revenue carriage of the state and the federal government. Recently, it was observed that the revenue accruing to Rivers State has been reduced on account of oil sabotage. According to *Transparency International Defence and Security*:

Illegal activity has led to revenue losses as oil is siphoned off and stolen; the human cost and environmental pollution have similarly been significant...Participants in oil theft, also called “oil bunkering”, steal oil from pipelines, refine the oil, and then sell it to local, regional and international markets. It is a profitable criminal industry that cost the Nigerian government 3.8 trillion Nigerian naira (approx. USD\$105 billion) in 2016 and 2017. (2019, p.1)

This unhealthy practice has thwarted the developmental strides of the States and the Federal Government of Nigeria. This is because the quantum of revenue loss to illegal criminal crude oil refiners should have been channeled to create and cater for socio-economic needs of the citizens of Nigeria. It is therefore the opinion of this paper that such criminally minded theft and its economic wastage that lead to a threat to life and degradation of the natural environment be eradicated forthwith.

Hazards of Black Soot Menace:

(I) Environmental Hazard: Environment is crucial to man and animals. Any alteration or destruction of the ecosystem leads to hazards and affects livelihood. It is obvious to state that the

incessant theft of crude oil and its illegal refining erodes the environment. Badejo and Nwilo (2020) assert that:

Illegal oil bunker and pipeline vandalism produce numerous dangerous releases that cause enormous ecological destruction. Oil spillage causes massive destruction of the environment; it destroys farmlands and leads to habitat loss, in this way decreasing arable land for cultivating... (*as cited* in Tombari, p. 144).

When the land is destroyed due to the vandalisation of crude oil pipelines, the economic, health and the social activities of man are at risk. No doubt, the beauty of livelihood and peaceful co-existence depends on a safe natural environment. Therefore, indiscriminate burning of farmland and spilling of petro-chemical materials (crude oil) as a result of illegal refining of crude oil constitute a great danger to the environment and human existence. Corroborating the above assertion, Akptor (2019) informs that “crude oil exploration and exploitation activities have been implicated as major causes of environmental degradation within the oil-bearing communities in Niger Delta” (p. 38).

(ii) Health Hazard: The soot pollution in the environment has an adverse effects on the mental health of the people. When the polluted air is inhaled, its consequences to human health are alarming. Some medical experts claim that the soot pollution can lead to severe cancer of the lungs and skin. In his reportage,

Ukpong (2022) writes on Governor Wike's warning on the dire consequences of illegal crude oil refining thus “We have equally appealed without success to our people engaging in this illegal business to consider its negative effects on our economy, environment, public safety and public health and disengage from it.” (<https://www.premiumtimesng.com>). A safe soot environment leads to a healthy, hygienic and prosperous health conditions of the people. In this direction, therefore, it is important to stop and prevent black soot pollution by curbing the activities of illegal crude oil refineries and indiscriminate burning of plastic/petro-chemical substances in our environment.

(iii) Socio-economic Hazard: Despite the health crisis that associates with soot pollution, its socio-economic effects are enormous. When crude oil spells on account of illegal refining activities, economic crops, animals, trees and aquatic livelihood are at risk and thus people find it difficult to farm on the land and fish in the river. Therefore those who depend on agricultural activities become redundant and face hunger and hardship. Consequently, most people die because they do not have money to feed and attend to their medical challenges.

Recommendations

This paper has navigated critically, the causes and consequences of the black soot menace in Rivers State and kindly recommends the followings:

- ❖ Indiscriminate burning of petroleum products such as

crude oil refining and other alien activities should stop forthwith to eradicate black soot.

- ❖ The regular use of community theatre performances to educate and sensitizes the people about the danger of illegal refining of crude oil should be encouraged and promoted.
- ❖ Government should put forward policy control and its corresponding sanctions on the illegal activities of crude oil refiners in Rivers.
- ❖ Also, there is the need for government and on-governmental organizations to set up empowerment programmes for the youths to dissuade them from engaging in illegal oil refining (*Kpo fire*) activities.
- ❖ Again, the paper recommends strongly that government should as a matter of necessity give a license to the operation of modular refineries. This will engage the youth to channel their skills and knowledge to improve oil production in the modular refinery sector.
- ❖ The paper recommends that people should be encouraged to plant trees in their neighborhood to prevent the excesses of black soot. It is observed that plants prevent soot from falling directly on the people.
- ❖ Setting up of taskforce by both the state government and traditional rulers (local authorities) to monitor the activities of illegal refining of crude oil will go a long way in curbing the black soot menace in Rivers State.

- ❖ When black soot occurs, the paper recommends wearing of facemask and sunshade lens to prevent the soot particles from entering the nostrils and eyes.

Conclusion

Man's inordinate quest for survival has been attributed to social disaggregation and denigration of the environment in recent times. The black soot menace and its consequences are examples of man's uncontrolled desire to amass wealth at all costs. In Rivers State, the incessant vandalization of crude oil pipelines and illegal refining activities has contributed to health and environmental hazard and other diseases that are detrimental to healthy living. It is on this note, that this paper makes a deliberate argument to position the need to use community theatre practice as an option to sensitize, educate, enlighten and, of course, inform the people about the consequences of illegal crude oil refining and thus curb the black soot menace in the society. To effectively curb the black soot pollution in Rivers State, government, non-governmental and other well-spirited individuals must as a matter of exigency sponsor and promote community theatre performances as a ready option of mobilization and sensitization in diverting the attention of those (youths) who indulge in the criminal activity of crude oil refining in Rivers State.

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