

# HISTORICAL RECONSTRUCTION OF SELECTED PLAYS FOR SUSTAINABLE GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT IN THE NIGER DELTA

**Emuobonuvie Ayanyen**

Department of English & Literary Studies,  
Delta State University, Abraka.  
ayanyenemuobor15@gmail.com

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**Abstract:** *History has always served as a veritable source of literary materials for creative writers. This is because, since the work of art derives its materials from the society, the recreation of the people's historical trajectory, especially at periods of crisis becomes a normal artistic phenomenon. The European encounter with the people of the Niger Delta has established itself as one of the most important themes in the literatures of the people. The writers of the region have, in many occasions reassessed imaginatively, various historical materials which derive from the people's engagement with the British imperialist at various points in their history. These materials are adopted and adapted by the playwrights in a manner that the issues involved are not only brought to the fore, but are reconstructed to comment on contemporary experiences of the people for sustainable growth and development. This paper therefore examines the playwrights' attempts to reconstruct the indices of colonialism in the society and its effect in the socio-political life of the people on the one hand and the role of the Nigerian state against her own people on the other hand. The essay leans on the theory of cultural studies to bring out the salient issues of history that constitute the path of growth and development in the Nigeria state. The paper concludes that the role of the white man in the destruction of the people's tribal world is both symbolical and historical and should be well reconstructed for sustainable growth and development in the Niger Delta.*

**Keywords:** Historical Drama, Niger Delta, Reconstruction, British Imperialists, Cultural Studies.

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## **Introduction**

History has always shaped the works of creative writers through veritable materials source which poignantly draws from true events via experiences as regards encounter with the European imperialists. It is against this background that Goldman (1975) informs us that “periods of crisis... are particularly favourable to the birth of great works of art and of literature because of the multiplicity of problems and experiences that they bring to man and of the great widening of effective and intellectual horizons they provoke” (p.50).

Overtime, writers have thus grappled with the nuances of history which they merge creatively to create aesthetic events that can neither be proven to be true or false. This is why Onukaogu and Onyerionwu (2009) explain that, “what the literary writer does with respect to the historical material available to him, is essentially to pass it through his imaginative forge, with the outcome bearing varying degrees of fictionalization of factual events, people and places” (p.70).

Although this historical consciousness has manifested in all the genres of literature, it is the dramatic form that has granted it liberty of space and theatrical exploration of experiences and events. Drama thus possesses the advantage of dialogue and action over other literary forms such as poetry and prose-fiction in the recreation of history. This is why Adimora-Ezeigbo (1998) believes that while these historical elements enrich and enliven the narrative, they are also crucial to the dramatization of the profundity of their sequential actions in a historical continuum.” (p.47). Awhefeada (2013) succinctly captures this when he explains that “drama best approximates true life experience in its representation of human existence”. According to him, the “privileging of action or the imitation of it is more real in drama than in prose or poetry.” (p.106).

The notion of historical reconstruction as used in this study is premised on the fact that history is a body of knowledge derived essentially from the past experience of a society and the reconstruction of this past experience would rely more on the testimonies of those who have experienced its changing phases overtime. In other words, the concept of reconstruction in the context of this study is the attempt by African dramatists to retell the people’s true life from the people’s unbiased point of view. It involves the creative quest for freedom in which the colonised people can re-assert themselves in the universal discourse of life. Part of this bid, Awhefeada (2011) notes, “is the reclamation of what

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colonialism destroyed in Africa and a denunciation of the contradictions inherent in the colonial adventure” (p.223).

This paper thus examines the role of selected Niger Delta dramas in the reconstruction of the people’s history. Through a close investigation of the various socio-political challenges that have confronted the people of Nigeria especially the Niger Delta people, this research evaluates the dramatics resolve to reconstruct the fangled history of the people, taken a critical deviation from earlier works that only centres on cultural identity and the romantization of the Nigeria cultural space. Having examined some of the historical and socio-political antecedents as well as the ideological moorings that gave birth to many of the African drama, the study attempts an evaluation of the playwrights’ resort to the ideological standpoint of reconstructing the history of the people in a manner that justice is placed in the eyes of all. We can thus confirm that the playwrights’ adoption of the technique of reconstruction foreground their patriotic zeal to reshape the distorted history of the people.

### **Role of Literature in the Sustainable Growth and Development in The Niger Delta**

The term reconstruction can be defined as the act of rebuilding an already destroyed object or structure. According to the *Cambridge English Dictionary*, it is the “process of building or creating something again that has been damaged or destroyed”. The same dictionary also defines reconstruction as “the process of making a country normal again after a war”. In the context of this study, however, reconstruction is used to mean a recreation of a people’s besmeared humanity or ways of life. Historical reconstruction thus explicates the attempt by the African playwrights to recreate the people’s historical past from their own perspective. To the African playwrights, there is the need to reconstruct the people’s past in a manner that the people social and historical experiences are interpreted as they really are in what Achebe (2000) described as “the process of “re-storying” peoples who had been knocked silent by the trauma of all kinds of dispossession” (p.79).

In their assessment of 21<sup>st</sup> century dramatic literature in Nigeria, Onukaogu and Onyerionwu (2009) explain that the Nigerian 21<sup>st</sup> century playwright/dramatist has approached the issue of history from the tangential points of two significant historical phases of the country. According to them, he/she “has captured and creatively reconstructed historical events of the pre-colonial and post-colonial Nigerian times.”(p.177). In this paper however, we are

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concern with the reconstruction of historical events in colonial Nigeria that endear on the people, issues that foreground contemporary circumstances in the country. As Onukaogu and Onyerionwu note further, “certain well-established and highly important dramatic tendencies have resurfaced in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and have given some sharpness to the creative vision of present-day drama” (177). These include historical reconstructions and adaptations, which have complemented the natural, understandable propensity to capture contemporary realities.

The two plays under investigation, like other Nigerian dramatic literature, tap copiously from the historical resources of the period. The aim is to creatively reconstruct the Niger Delta history in a self-discovery manner for the people of the region to rediscover their “historical roots...” (Emenyonu, 1982 p 22). As Emenyonu explains further, the literature of a people must be “an imaginative recreation of a people’s account of their social, cultural, political and economic perspectives at a given time and place” (22). In discussing Ola Rotimi’s *Akassa Youmi: An Historical Drama* and Sam Ukala’s *Iredi War* from a historical perspective however, they must be viewed as dramatic works of cultural identity.

Contemporary Niger Delta drama has, over the years, adumbrate the plight of the people and serve as their voice in the reconstruction of their historical condition that has been made parlous, right from the colonial era to the present. Kekeghe and Omobowale (2025) maintain that the repressive experiences in the Niger Delta region have given rise to trauma poetry. This, to a large extent explains the utilitarian value of African literature. The history of the Niger Delta is replete with conflict of interest between the people of the region and British imperialists on the one hand, and between the people and the oil multinationals in collaboration with the Nigerian state on the other. In many of these conflicts, the people’s resolve to oppose all forms of exploitation and dispossession are met with the superior might of the British imperialists and in most cases, lives and properties are lost. Besides, many of the conflict that pitted the Niger Delta people against the European imperialists are economic and political. Since literature reflect and refract the issues that concerns a people at a particular time, the dramatic works of the Niger Delta highlights the challenges of the people and reconstruct same in a manner that a balance dramatization of such events are presented.

The essential mission of the Niger Delta playwrights therefore is to unearth historical materials from their society and reconstruct them in a manner that the people’s perspectives that have over the years been given little thoughts are

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dramatically foregrounded. This is why Akachi Ezeugo (2018) tells us that drama “helps in the documentation of a true-life action for performance before the present and future members of the society” (p.253).

As dramatists, the three playwrights under investigation use their plays as vehicles for social, economic and political reconstruction of the Niger Delta. The thematic preoccupations in the plays reveal the pathetic and desperate condition on which the people of the Niger Delta are made to navigate their paths by the British imperialist. The playwrights therefore, through their works, protest the oppressive tendencies of the colonialists against the people of the Niger Delta which have snowballed into contemporary times in Nigeria. The aim, basically, is to reject oppression and dispossession in all its ramifications. This, to a large extent, is the position of Osundare (1985) when he affirms that the “writer has no alternative to being in constant conflict with oppression” (p.4).

In *Akassa Youmi: An Historical Drama* for instance, Ola Rotimi explores the collective struggle of the people of the Niger Delta against colonial exploitation, abuse of power and injustice. The play dramatizes the British occupation of Nembe community with heavy colonial force and the struggle by the Nembe people to regain their lost voice and glory. At the beginning of the play, it is evident that Nembe’s status as a sovereign ethnic nation ceased to be as a result of the imposition of various stringent economic and trade rules by the Royal Niger Company. Nembe becomes a vassal state answerable to the authority of the Royal Niger Company, a monopolistic mercantile company. Such nationally vexatious issues like the wanton abuse and dislocation of the Nembe culture, the attempt made by the white to cripple the Nembe throne, division of Nembe people between Nembe traditional religion and the Western religion through the Christianization of its symbol of spiritual and political authority: the king and the various laws put in place to strangulate the Nembe race socially and economically became ready events for the clamour for a national personality and resistance to the foreign colonial domination. This imposes great pain and anxiety on the human psyche. In fact, Nembe experienced a withering away of its reality. In the *Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon (1985) makes the point that “to fight for national culture means, in the first place, to fight for liberation of the nation, that material keystone which makes the building of a culture possible” (p.73).

Also, in *Iredi War*, Ukala evaluates the battle between the treacherous and possessive colonial institution, represented by Crewe-Read, the Colonial District Commissioner of Agbor against the people of Owa kingdom, led by their king, Igboba. The play foregrounds the people’s collective will against the forces of oppression and dispossession symbolized by Crewe-Read, the imperialist tool in

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the Niger Delta. In evaluating the historical undertone of Ukala's *Iredi War*, Kekeghe (2015) acknowledges the playwright's effort to deculturalise and transculturalise sociohistorical and cultural realities.

In *Akassa Youmi: An Historical Drama* for instance, we come across Rotimi's sense of history as a dramatist who uses his play to convey the various socio-political injustices meted on the people of the Niger Delta by the colonialists all in the name of trade and treaties. In the play, Rotimi opens the window of Nembe's glorious past and spirit of nationalism through the character, Crocodile -Without - Shame and his second in command Amazige. The picture of Nationalism and the need for its attainment is vividly highlighted in the circle of the play. It is at that circle that we are informed that Goldie and the Niger Company took over all the trades of Nembe along the Niger Coast protectorate. Crocodile-Without-Shame (C-W-S) and his group of pirates are by the playwright's brilliant plotting, used significantly as instruments for drawing up the differences in Nembe between the past and the present of Nembe for positive action to be taken for the actualization of her self-determination. Through a system of questions and answers, it is established that the present situation, in which Nembe people obtain licenses before trading in their own areas, is a bad one and differs from tradition, which demands that European traders pay comeys to the king of Nembe.

OKORIO: Well, in the paper which they say our former king, Igbeta, signed, the Queen of England has right to protect us the Brass people.

IGONI: It is so. But the Queen of England - she divided our land into two. She gave one part to the whiteman, Goldie and his men.

SAMBO: The Royal Niger Company

C-W-S: Good. And the other part?

IGONI: The Queen gave another white people they call ... I have forgotten.

AMAZIGE: Niger Coast Protectorate.

C-W-S: So it was. And after they got those lands what did they do? The white people?

KULABO: Goldie and the Niger Company took over all the trade areas.

C-W-S: And the Niger Coast Protectorate?

KULABO: It protects Goldie and the new white traders.

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C-W-S: And the Nembe people – what do they get from all this? What benefits?

OKORIO: Some of our people traded with them and became richmen.

C-W-S: Some. I'm talking of benefits for the Nembe people at large (*no answer.*) See? Nobody knows. You all just feel there's something wrong. Something keeps you hungry, and you get angry, and you want to squash that source of pain. But now did the pain get into you – what caused it? you're dumb, too dumb to know, too lazy to find out. Well fellows, I respect thieves true, but intelligent thieves.

IGODO: I want to ask one question: this intelligence, intelligence – does intelligence really matter? I mean in our kind of work. We have muscles, we are hungry, we are thirsty; our wives are sick, our children die; the oppressors keep crushing our manhood; we have firearms. Are these not enough to make a man burn for action?

C-W-S: And when the oppressors give you food for your hunger, and alcohol to quench your thirst, and false praise to soothe crushed manhood, all will be well. Is that it? Your burning cooled, your human pride won back. Is that it? In that case, I change my mind. You're pickpockets. You're bush-pigs! Some food, some water, a pat on the rump, and full happiness, great satisfaction comes to you. That is the trouble with us. Like the python, fill the stomach, and contentment reigns. Even its safety being – black, white or green – any man with respect for himself, and pride for his race, would starve in the dignity of resistance, than belch in the contentment of domination by strangers. Now, the question for the last time: “what has the Nembeman gained from the treaty which the white Queen made Igbeta to sign? (*Akassa, 47-48*).

The above conversation practically sets out the theme of the play. The people of the Niger Delta have been dispossessed of all their means of livelihood by the colonialists. The only responsible alternative open to them is to fight for their rights and the future of their land. This dramatic reconstruction is apt because the social, political and historical background that constitutes the thematic preoccupation of the play is still current in the face of contemporary

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realities in the Nigerian state. By deduction, therefore, an argument is made for the people to fight for their rights.

Furthermore, the character of Crocodile-Without- Shame, though a kingpin of the sea pirates is also deliberately positioned through his elegant characterization as a functional example of a revolutionary leader. One responsibility of leadership which is out to secure freedom is to sufficiently educate and conscientize the people, his subjects on the nitty-gritty of the whys and wherefores of the revolution. He gives his followers awareness. A revolution that is to be carried out without awareness of the people is bound to fail. It is awareness that moves people to freedom. It is the force that wakes up the sleeping giant to slumber no more. The mobilization of the masses, when it arises out of the wars of liberation, introduces into each man's consciousness the idea of a common cause, of a national destiny and of a collective history (Fanon,1985 p.73). Consciousness, generally speaking, refers to the awareness that a person or a group has both objectively and subjectively through the faculties of reason and reflection. Consciousness is knowledge of self or a person's place in life around him.

Similar ideology of historical reconstruction is constructed in Ukala's *Iredi War*. In this play, Ukala explores the concept of leadership and responsibility. His sense of history goes beyond the notion of history as a record of past events. It has a core of reality which provides its own distinct perspectives whether projecting a point of view or relating to an ideology. The 1906 uprising of the people of Owa kingdom of present day Ika North-East Local Government Area of Delta State provides the background for the play, but Ukala weaves a parable on the theme of 'collective struggle' forged through reprisal attacks of Owa youths on the manhandling of their king and chiefs by Crewe-Read and his policemen, the killing of their youth leader and the burning of Owa shrines by attacking and killing of Crewe-Read and some of his men.

The theme of leadership and responsibility manifests significantly in the role of king Igboba. King Igboba as the play's hero organises his subjects to resist the insensitive and oppressive attitude of Crewe-Read. When faced by the bait in the form of lesser punishment which will mean that his subjects would be jailed or executed for their role in the uprising, king Igboba brushes the attraction aside and offered himself for the execution.

IGBOBA: So kind of you, my friend indeed! But take me to them.

CHICHESTER: Hear me out.

IGBOBA: (*Declaims.*) I said, take me to them!

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CHICHESTER: (*To Igboba.*) Hear me out, please. You see, there are grave charges against you, including incitement of the peace-loving people of Owa against His Royal Majesty King Edward VII; ordering your warriors to kill Crewe-Read; and personally, killing Sergeant Lawani. I want to save you, if I can. I want us to prove beyond reasonable doubt that you committed no such crimes. But, first, we have to enter your plea. Are you guilty or not guilty?

IGBOBA: I'm not a baby, Mr. Chichester. I know the end of this trial. Be it private or public, I know the end. No matter my plea, guilty or not guilty, you'll banish me from my kingdom as you did Oba Ovonromwen of Benin, as you did king Nana of Itsekiri land. Listen, if my people deserve to die by hanging because they dared to defend their fatherland against oppressive aggression from you and your people, I desire to die with them because they ran my errand. Take me to them. If I must live, even in exile, my people must live also. Exile will end one day, whether you like it or not, and I'll need my subjects, for what is a king without subjects. Owa will need them, for what is a kingdom without people? I can assure you that your evil grip on Owa will not last forever. The evil bottom of king Edward will not spread over the throne of my ancestors forever. (*Iredi, 94-95*).

Ukala thus locates the conflict in the play on the colonialist, who acting on their treacherous treaties, exploit and dispossession the people of their God given resources. However, the Niger Delta people who demand justice or protest against exploitation and aggression are seen as restive and trucebreakers. In other to reconstruct the besmeared history of the people of the Niger Delta therefore, there must be social and political awareness aimed at enlightening the oppressed masses about their history which is dramatized in its proper perspective.

Furthermore, the playwrights use their plays not only as a historical reconstruction of the people's bartered history but also to convey the various socio-political and economic injustices done to the minority people of the Niger Delta over time. The technique of protest and direct confrontation which is deployed in the three plays affirmed the playwrights' commitment to the idea of re-orientating the people of the Niger Delta in order for them to face their problem squarely in the face of contemporary enslavement in the Nigerian state. Thus in order to achieve this re-orientation, the playwrights' present two distinct world in their plays – one which explains the people's glorious past before the advent

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of colonialism and the other, which exposes the oppression and dispossession that constitute nature of European imperialism.

In *Akassa Youmi...* for instance, Rotimi recreates a scene where the able-bodied men in Nembe land are educated on the challenges of the people brought about by the presence of the European imperialists in their land. He therefore presents King Koko as one who understands the plight of his people but only needs them to understand the reason why they must confront their enemy wisely in order to survive or repossess their land. To this end, he assigns Crocodile-Without - Shame, the task of educating the masses on the reasons why the revolt against the Royal Niger Company is imperative if Nembe must regain its political, cultural and economic identities. Crocodile-Without-Shame on the other hand, is conscious of this instrument of revolution; hence, he asks Amazige, the historian in the group to educate other members of the pirate gang with the background to the laws imposed by the Royal Niger Company on Nembe. The conversation between C-W-S and Amazige presents the background for the direct confrontation of the imperialists:

AMAZIGE: In days gone by or venturing into the waters of our fathers white traders paid 'comey' to the king of Nembe, next Whiteman paid what they called 'trust' this was like a loan-a loan to our own traders, here in Nembe. Nembe traders then went into the up country, bought oil and other goods. The same Nembe traders, our own fathers, brought back these goods and oil to the Whiteman, who then paid our fathers the balance of the 'trust' that was how it worked. The Blackman made his profit; the Whiteman got his oil. The story ends.

C-W-S: Those were days gone by. Now what are the laws that our people break and shot for?

AMAZIGE: All I know is that since the big White, Goldie, and his Royal Niger Company took over the lands of trade in the upcountry our own black traders are forced to pay a lot of money for permission to trade as before.

C-W-S: I thank you. To trade these days you the Nembeman must first buy a trade licence'. Now, from whom do you buy it - this 'trade licence'? From the King of Nembe?

AMAZIGE: No - from the Royal Niger Company of Whiteman Goldie.

C-W-S: ₦50,000. That trading licence costs ₦50,000 - for those you don't know. Speak on.

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AMAZIGE: Next, to trade in alcohol, the Nembeman must buy another kind of licence. They call this: "Spirit Licence".

C-W-S: Again from Goldie and the Royal Niger Company. That costs how much?

AMAZIGE: That's another ₦100,000 (*Akassa, p.50-51*).

This thus sets the stage for the final onslaught that necessitated the invasion of the base of the Royal Niger Company. King Koko and his ally, Crocodile-Without-Shame are symbols of nationalism that the people of Nembeland needed in their time of trials. The aim of presenting these two characters in this light is to show to contemporary Africans the need for purposeful leadership. For instance, having adequately conscientized his gang members including the new initiates, he said to them, "any man, any being, black, white or green-any man with respect for himself, and pride for his race, would starve in the dignity of resistance, than belch in the contentment of domination by strangers (*Akassa p.48*).

Crocodile -Without- Shame, the Headman of the sea pirates, is charged with nationalistic dedication and psychological faith in the Nembe dream to resist European domination to reclaim its identity. After raising the consciousness of Posi, Amanaghan and others, he urges them to return to Nembe to inform King Koko that if he (Koko) needs fighters to combine forces against the oppressors, he Crocodile-Without-Shame is ready.

In this people's struggle to regain its natural identity, Crocodile- Without -Shame and his sea piracy gang are first to affirmatively declare support for the fight against the oppressors. This began the planting of the mood of revolution in Nembe. Odumegwu Ojukwu (1969) States that, revolution is "a change – a quick change, for the better. Every society is changing all the time. It is changing for the better or for worse; it is either moving forward or moving backward; it cannot stand absolutely still" (p.15). A Revolution is a forward movement. It is a rapid forward movement which improves a people's standard of living and their material circumstances and purifies and raises their moral tone. It transforms for better, those institutions which are still relevant, and discards those which stand in the way of progress.

Obafemi (1982) adds his voice to the concept of revolution and opened a new perspective different from that of Ojukwu. He says, 'Revolution has to be collective. If any man believes he can do it alone, he is fooling himself. The forces that he is fighting are enormous....'(p.119). Let us start from history, none of the revolutionaries worked alone. This capturing of the basic characteristics and

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objectives of revolution appropriately depicts the collective struggle of the Nembe people in the attainment of national identity.

As evident in the dramatic presentation of the Nembe rise against the Whiteman, it is clear that the colonial philosophy and its forceful practice offend the judgment and sensibility of Ozongbai, the great priest of the shrine, mouth piece of Nembe as well as the custodian of the tradition. Hence, moved by his adoration for Nembe survival and demand for the installation of Nembe's right to self-determination, he educates King Koko on the difference between to rule and to lead. The ultimate goal of Ozongbai in the leadership and rulership dialogue he had with Koko is to set Koko into action as the anointed liberator of Nembe. When Koko informs Ozongbai that he has come to submit to the advice of the ancestors Ozongbai charges him. And in their collective voice: I charge you to prepare yourself to be leader, and save the land from sinking further.

In realizing the identity of Nationalism in the play, Rotimi returns Koko from Christianity to traditional religion an incongruous situation in which whitemen-purveyors of the New Religion – turn out also to be practitioners of the great wickedness visited on the people by the Royal Niger Company (Akassa,p.XIII). Oruadiri's assault on Koko is pressurized by the collective discontent and indignation of the community. Crocodile-without- Shame's declaration of support for the freedom dream of Nembe and Ozongbai's constant spiritual backing given to king Koko and the fighters are resounding nationalistic efforts.

Rotimi teaches us in the play with the Koko, C-W-S and Ozongbai tripartite paradigm of leadership that, only men who are inspired, who have charismatic dignity by their great deeds, reasoning and tactics decisively and decidedly win freedom for the oppressed. It is also evident that nothing short of moral certainty and unbending will of a supportive followership can engender the concrete realization of the brighter and greener side of freedom. This is because a people without the consciousness, the philosophy and psychology of freedom cannot earn it if they shout, cry and carry arms for even a thousand years.

The Niger Delta example of leadership and followership during periods of national crises in *Akassa Youmi* is a positive image; an image creatively designed to achieve Nationalism and national identity for the Nembe race and the Niger Delta. No people struggling for freedom or identity can achieve it without a good leadership, without good followership, without unity and without placing value on the struggle for change. This is what Rotimi practically demonstrates in his drama on the question of national identity. Koko, Ozongbai

and the Women of Nembe are physical embodiments of passionate patriots and personifications of nationalism. Jeyifo (1991) speaks of a writer as “a promoter of explicit social, political and moral values crucial to the survival of his or her society. Rotimi has sufficiently demonstrated this in *Akassa Youmi*, as he is burdened by the collapse of Nembe identity and rights being his maternal home (Akassa, p.IX). Hence, he gives dispensation of restorative justice a significant attention to recover the destiny of Niger Delta.

These principal archetypal characters with nationalistic depiction as in the case of Koko who is under psychological impulsion, demonstrate a good deal of awareness of people’s dilemma which springs from the forceful removal of their sovereignty for a painful servitude in their land and the consistent domineering influence of the colonialists. The people of the Niger Delta are impoverished and disoriented socio-economically, culturally and politically. They are therefore fanatical about a return to the old political, cultural, economic and spiritual status quo. Both Rotimi and the characters in the cosmos of the play celebrate the question of Niger Delta survival, nationalism and subaltern voice. *Akassa Youmi* is a product of a high value aesthetics constructed around the Niger Delta confrontation with the white government with a radical ideology to regain the lost voice of the people.

In *Iredi War*, it was Iwekuba that is charged with the responsibility of not only inspiring the Owa warriors but also to fortify them for the task ahead. Ukala in this play uses the characters of King Igboba and Iwekuba, like King Koko and C-W-S to extol the quality of good leadership that is necessary for the emancipation of the oppressed peoples of the Niger Delta in particular and Africa in general. There is the need to educate and strengthen the people in readiness to fight against oppression in all its ramifications. Thus, at a time the warriors of Owa were disenchanted by the death of their leader, Iwekuba was sent to them by the King to prepare them for the task ahead. He tells them thus:

IWEKUBA: I’ve come to help. The Obi asked me to.

EBIE: Help with what, Baba?

IWEKUBA: To prepare the unprepared among you. They shot him (*Pointing to Uzun’s Body*) ... just once, with the same gun that went dumb when it was aimed at me! And here he lies lifeless. Some of you here came to that scene, and, when it was time to fight, you ran away! You can’t go to war like that. And God forbid that you return like this ... (*indicates the corpse.*) Owa is holding you like a priced bird and you cannot shed your feathers into her hands. So

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those of you who know that, once they're shot, they'd fall like this, please, step out. After a little hesitation, several people step out. IWEKUBA shakes his head in dismay.) You see what I mean? People don't win war with songs and oaths only (*Iredi, p.42*).

What derives from the above conversation is that what the oppressed people of the Niger Delta, and indeed Africa, need in the quest for freedom, is true leadership. Leaders who can put down their lives in the line of duty for the emancipation of their people. For instance, King Igbooba of about a hundred years or more couldn't sleep when his warriors were in the battlefield, waging war with the forces of Crewe-Read. He came out at night to practice the use of his sword again. Even when the Queen of Owa urges him to rest, he refuses. The Queen says:

NNEKA: You wish you were the one leading our warriors in the battle.

IGBOBA: I really don't see why I shouldn't be -

NNEKA: especially, since you're still full of energy, eh?

IGBOBA: Am I not? (*Aiming the spear at her.*)

NNEKA: Of course, you are, my great lion! ... But lower your spear or I'll go pick mine. You think I don't feel full of energy myself? (*IGBOBA burst into laughter as he lowers his spear.*) Laugh, if you like ... But, my Lord, what we feel now is a different kind of energy. It's energy to exist, energy to draw in air and hold on to life like a brittle string, energy to walk in the morning dew and yet convince yourself that you feel the heaviness of rain. It's the energy of a toddler's feet gripping the earth for fear of a fall. My Lord, it is not the same as the reckless energy that dares death... (p.49-50).

When viewed against the backdrop of contemporary realities, the Niger Delta and indeed Nigeria is suffering from poor leadership. This is one of the major reasons why the gap between the oppressed and the oppressors is so thick in Nigeria. In the Niger Delta for instance, the people are treated as conquered people in their own country. They are daily dispossessed of their God-given resources by the Nigerian state in collaboration with the oil multinationals as the British did during the colonial era. This is the historical reconstruction that the

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Niger Delta playwrights have come to canvass in order to liberate their people from the shackles of oppression.

### **Conclusion**

This paper shows that Niger Delta drama, like Nigeria literature in general, dramatizes, in the main, the struggles and protests of the people against exploitation and dispossession. It also demonstrates that in most of the plays of the colonial period, the enemy is the white man; is Nigerian cronies who are in the minority, sometimes members of the community, are considered and treated as enemies of the people. They use profiteers within the oil-bearing communities, especially chiefs, to cause disharmony, destabilize the community and weaken the people's collective resolve and capacity to fight for their rights.

This strategy has greatly affected the Niger Delta struggle adversely. As Koko tells us in Ola Rotimi's *Akassa Youmi*, "oppressors wax stronger when supported by scavengers from the very oppressed" (p.96). Fanon foresaw the capacity of colonial forces to infiltrate the ranks of the "natives" and destabilize communities and weaken the anti-colonial/imperialism struggle. He aptly observed that "the battle against colonialism does not run straight away along the lines of nationalism" (p.119). He therefore identifies as one of the pitfalls of national consciousness the fact that the national bourgeoisie or educated middle class simply want to be part of the colonial racket. "To them, nationalization" of the nation's industries and trading sectors "quite simply means the transfer into native hands of those unfair advantages which are a legacy of the colonial period" (Fanon, 1967 p.122).

The playwrights give the people cultural pride and identity, a reconstructive force of antithesis against colonialism, which united and produced the people's voice that mobilized them against British rule. They present Niger Delta nationalism and national identity on the political agenda of their struggle as a foremost vector of the movement of history as the national character of Niger Delta struggle are epitomized in the three plays.

We need to draw attention to the fact that the cultural component of the Niger Delta national identity struggle tends to be more obligatory and communally reinforcing at the time of great danger and European persecution. It can be stated here that culture was deployed as an instrument for the reconstruction of the people's belief in themselves against the forces of oppression and dispossession. King Koko, Crocodile- Without- Shame, King Igbova and King Jaja in their nationalistic disposition, appeal to the power of

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collective memory- well attested memories- in the cause of invoking the Niger Delta glorious historical past that has been buried brutally by the economic politics of the new and alien rulers of the region.

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