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Re-defining stewardship in the Niger Delta: A graft or 'giraffe' principle?

ABSTRACT

The author grew up in Ogba (Nigeria) where the land and wetlands meant everything for the survival of the various communities of the Niger Delta. There has been in this region an ethic of holistic stewardship which people exercised in all matters of land ownership and use especially within Ogba and Ekpeye[2]before the advent of oil exploration, exploitation and exportation[3]. This ethic has been based on what I have called a "giraffe principle" as opposed to a "graft principle" which is being applied in the sharing of oil wealth by certain stakeholders including both multinational oil companies and various Nigerian governments. By means of "graft" the wealth of major stakeholders like oil bearing communities have been expropriated under the guise of 13% derivation policy and this has aggravated the negative attitude of oil producing communities towards the expropriators, that is both State agencies and multinational oil companies. It has created social and economic tensions wrongly tagged "militancy"[4] presently being repressed by government combat forces. This article suggests a solution which calls for the application of a "giraffe principle" prescribing a tripartite ethic of sharing the oil wealth in a humane, prudent and liberating manner.

INTRODUCTION

There is a gerontocratic sense of holistic stewardship which people exercised in all matters of land ownership and use in various Nigerian communities, especially among Ogba and Ekpeye of the Niger Delta. This is based on what I would like to call a "giraffe principle" with the following definition:

The "giraffe principle" is a tripartite ethic of sharing, based on a win - win situation, on a compensatory use of land, and on good neighbourliness illustrated through a just, fair and equitable human response to an emerging social and economic reality, involving the cultivation, sharing and use of natural resources by stakeholders.

The "giraffe principle" is deeply rooted in a gerontocratic culture with value and relevance to nearly all human communities in Nigeria, and as such we have to understand how it works. Let us

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2 For purposes of clarity we shall limit our analysis to the Ogba and Ekpeye ethnic nationalities of Rivers State, Nigeria with occasional allusions to neighbouring Nigerian communities both within and outside the Niger Delta region.

3 The issues of the three E's has been outlined in reminiscences see Ahiamadu (2003:1-19)

4 For an incisive discussion of root causes of "militancy" in the Niger Delta see Evuleocha S. U. (2003:328-340).

start by examining critically the gerontocratic exercise of stewardship in Nigerian culture itself.

A CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF STEWARDSHIP CULTURE

As the name implies, gerontocracy has at the back of it a sense of an orderly rule by the elders. Another way to describe gerontocracy is the "rule of and respect for the most elderly" and it is my submission that it has the "giraffe principle" of equity and justice underlying it and evidence of this can be seen in the writings of many Nigerian scholars (Ehusani 1991:91; Amadiume 1987:22; Amadi 1982:94).

The "giraffe principle" will be explained in the anecdote below, but it calls for a thorough understanding of what gerontocracy – a rule by elders – meant in a context in which all land is seen as belonging to God, and the people as having received it from Him as a heritage. It is a heritage of stewardship which is impacted by the "giraffe principle" in both land tenure and land use practices (Amadi 1982:59). Simply put, it is a principle that revolves around the most elderly in traditional Nigerian ethnic communities (Sofola 1973:50).

It is instructive to note that a gerontocratic culture binds various Nigerian communities together. In applying the same to Nigerian culture in general, Ehusani (1991:93) stated:

> "The status (of gerontocracy) is acquired progressively and not fully until old age, during the final phase of existence".

Or as stated by Sofola (1973:50):

> "The cardinal virtue of the typical African is a wholesome human relations among people; respect for elders; community fellow feeling, and hospitality".

Although Ogba and Ekpeye are geographically situated in the Niger Delta, they have affinity with the Igbo and Yoruba as their "remote"[5] eastern and western neighbours respectively. Interestingly, through the institution of gerontocracy, various Nigerian ethnic groups – small or large, have come together to make or forge a new national identity. This identity is one in which the older members of the community or group lead. In these cultures gerontocracy is synonymous with patriarchy, but sometimes older women do exercise influence directly or indirectly. However, certain features mark out a gerontocratic culture, namely, it is patriarchal in matters of government and law-making, patrilineal in matters of inheritance and stewardship of land and mineral resources, as well as patrilocal in matters of marriage and domiciliation. These points need no elaboration as they are self-evident in most African cultures. Perhaps we need to mention that there is an interface between religion and gerontocracy in these cultures which has been captured in the words of John Mbiti (1996:174-180):

> "To the African this is a deeply religious universe, whether it is viewed in terms of time or space, and human life is a religious experience in that universe."

The process of erosion which has set into this interface between religion and gerontocracy in Africa is evident in the writings of African scholars (Ehusani 1991:91-92)[6]. The writing underscores

5 Ogba and Ekpeye are "remote" neighbors of the Igbo and Yoruba in the sense of geographical distance, though not in a cultural sense. There are other ethnic groups which separate Ogba and Ekpeye directly from the Igbo and Yoruba on the east and west. This includes the Ikwerre and Etche / Awarra on the east and the Ijo, Edo and Etsako on the west. See A. Ahiamadu (2000:1-3,19-24).

6 See for instance Chinua Achebe 1994 ***Things Fall Apart – the Centre Cannot Hold***. London: Heinemann, which is a classic book written from a Nigerian perspective to show how colonialism negatively impacted on African traditional values and institutions leading to social and cultural fission.

the point that coming to grips with transcendental values such as respect for elders, the demonstration of care and concern for women, children and human well being in general, the practice of hospitality and above all living in communalism is becoming an 'issue' in theological reflections in Nigeria, due to external fissiparous influences[7].

A perspective of gerontocratic values reinforces this sense of community in Nigeria albeit Africa, and can be seen in a brief recapitulation of what it means to the Igbo and Yoruba of Nigeria in particular. This can then be understood better when it is narrowed down in a similar discussion about Ogba and Ekpeye with a special elaboration of the already mentioned "giraffe principle".

AMONG THE IGBO - TWO LEVELS OF LAWS GOVERN A RE-DEFINED STEWARDSHIP

It is instructive to note as Amadiume (1987:22) points out that, among the Igbo the elderly males allocate for instance land for use at the nuclear family levels, but the actual control of the usufruct of the land economy is in the hands of the women. In other words, Igbo economy was marked by "a clear sexual division of labour and an associated gender division of crops" (Amadiume 1987:22). In the same way, the elders among the Igbo are considered the stewards, custodians, if not guardians of the land and mineral resources. On a religious note, the land is a living entity created by God and capable of detecting whatever wrongs are committed on it by its inhabitants. It is also capable of yielding abundant benefits to those inhabitants who carefully observe its ethos (Onyeocha 2006:63-80). Stewardship consists of a careful observance of the mores and ethos of the land. Offences committed against nature are generally regarded as offences committed against the land, and by implication against the ancestors as well as against the elders.

Such offences infringe upon the stewardship role of the elders or gerontocrats and are tantamount to "imeru ala" (defiling the land). Hence there are two levels of laws governing land ownership and use among the Igbo – the visible and spiritual, with the former deriving from humans for the protection of interpersonal relationships on the one hand, and on the other preserving the humans-nature partnership (Ikengah-Metuh 1987:114). The latter of course are laws which ensure that people respond to the requirements to worship God in a spiritual line made up of the ancestors, deities, spirits and the Supreme Deity (Obi 2006:115-116). It is instructive to note that Christianity came among the Igbos more than one century ago and undoubtedly have influenced Igbo customs and ethos, and so their resonance with Deuteronomistic ethics is not in any doubt (Nkwoka 2001:326-335).

AMONG THE YORUBA, RE-DEFINED STEWARDSHIP, IS INTER GENERATIONAL.

Moreover, these customs and ethos also have a horizontal resonance with customs and ethos in neighbouring African communities such as among the Yoruba in the fact that the oldest members rule. The Yoruba cosmogony is imbued with the idea of a gerontocracy which has at its centre the concept of creation that is not necessarily ex nihilo (Idowu 1996:124). In order for the earth and seas to be created, the compliance of elements such as the calabash, the ash and the chameleon to the will of the Creator was necessary (Aderibigbe 1999:328-338) . Therefore, land among the Yorubas is the heritage which the Deity bestowed on ancestors, the present generation, and unborn members of the family (Yakubu 1985:262). It has been noted that the reason behind the practice of gerontocracy in Nigerian cultures is the fact that the oldest members of the community are regarded as representatives not only of the ancestors, but

7 See Ehusani (1991:77-120).

also of God in the management of land and natural resources which belonged to God (Ehusani 1991:212). Such management is meant to result in the general well-being not only of the living and the yet to be born, but also in the honour and veneration of God through the ancestors (Assohoto and Ngewa 2006:11).

The "giraffe principle" is at the heart of a gerontocratic culture among various Nigerian communities, the Igbo and Yoruba inclusive. It is the principle around which the cosmic order revolves and it facilitates an equitable use of land, of nature and all its abundant resources (Amadiume 1987:22). In the "giraffe principle" is contained the role of humans to use natural resources discretely and responsibly with a view to prudent management and a systematic preservation of such resources for the present and future generation. Trees, games, crops, fishery resources etc. all require a prudent and judicious use in order to avoid the disappearance of species.[8] The Igbo and Yoruba practice of gerontocracy has deliberately been briefly discussed to enable us look more closely at how the principle is lived among the Ogba and Ekpeye.

RE-DEFINED STEWARDSHIP - A "GIRAFFE" NOT A "GRAFT" PRINCIPLE!

A description of the "giraffe principle" based on proverbs and anecdotal tale is the fulcrum of a gerontocratic culture. It helps us understand the underlying philosophical world in which people's thinking has been shaped, especially when it comes to stewardship and use of land, presumably given to respective ancestors by a living God who expects that sharing the benefits accruing from land must follow certain basic principles of "giraffe" and not "graft". The former implies the application of a tripartite ethic of sharing using a win-win principle, the principle of compensatory utilisation of land, and the principle of good neighbourliness. This is true of land whether offered to Government or to multi-national companies for oil exploration and exploitation. The latter which unfortunately have been the vogue in Nigeria since 1970 is based on a principle of "elite rule", a "lion share" or "win-loose" principle.

The non-application of the "giraffe" principles in the stewardship of land by both the oil companies and government has created a situation of restiveness and frustration among the people. This frustration is tagged "militancy" and is written as with a sun-beam on the pages of both print and electronic media in Nigeria and around the world, and is supported by our own research findings among for instance the Ogba and Ekpeye.

Let us use the following proverbs and anecdote from the Ogba and Ekpeye to illustrate what in the self-understanding of the people can be described as the "best practice" (Frynas 2005:581-598; Wright 1983:28; Birch 1991:90)[9] level in the sharing of oil and land resources and their utilization in a responsible and accountable way.

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8 The author grew up more or less in a pristine culture in which the land and wetlands meant everything for the survival of the various communities of the Niger Delta. The Ogba and Ekpeye for instance taught their children how to cut trees selectively, how to harness dairy products of wild birds judiciously, and how not to disturb the "soldier" and "tailor" ants in their ceaseless march from one end of the land to the other depending on the changing seasons. It was taboo to catch a bird in the bush where it was laying eggs or to return home with all the eggs so laid.

9 In the Niger Delta and under the cover of "best practice", multinational oil companies do all corporate investments within their host communities with minimum compliance with healthy environmental standards, ignoring environmental impact requirements to the detriment of their host communities, and even without the consent of their host governments; all under the cover of "best practice". Hence such abuses have not only been felt at the economic level, but also at the social, cultural, ecological, environmental and theological levels. For a discussion of Corporate Social Responsibility and what is considered a "best practice" level, see Frynas (2005: 581-598).

Ogba is a land whose economy has been based on communal agriculture for centuries. It is a land of forests, wetlands, rivers and streams that team with creatures on "sky", "land" and "sea". The "giraffe" is one such rare animal which, along with the elephant, the buffalo, the tiger, antelope, leopard, and numerous others, roam the forests along with creeping animals, flying birds and insects. There are times when farm lands have to be jointly protected from these roaming creatures. The giraffe, the elephant, or even a horde of pigs can invade the crops to feast from it, usually at night(Ahiamadu 2007:118-121; 1982b:2-3).

According to this anecdotal tale (Ahiamadu 2007:118): "all the kinsmen kept vigil over the farm land belonging to each kindred group, and like hunters each had a weapon and a torch on hand. They kept their vigils in turns and in alternating group order – with weapons of war both to scare the invading animals and if possible to kill the giraffe – known to be the largest and the most visible animal. Otherwise it would rob the community of their only means of livelihood – destroying the crops in their attempt to feed on the new farms. As each hunting gang kept watch during their respective night-duties, they did so completely unaware of the point at which the 'giraffe' may emerge, but they knew that the one on whose farm the animal not only emerged but is also killed is the lucky one. Therefore, each one held his weapon of war, be it a spear, a forked but strong wooden pole, a machete or cutlass, a Dane gun[10] or even a hatchet. Among the hunters, some came with their bush lamps and torches as well as with forked poles for pinning the "beast" down.

"At a time the watchmen least expected it, the invading giraffe suddenly emerged along with other foraging animals. A long and injurious battle ensued in their bid not to let the animal escape and if possible to kill it. After a long and hard battle with the huge and towering beast, it was eventually mowed down in the farm land of one of the farmers and watchmen. This huge animal was hewn down with spears and arrows, but not without it putting up a big struggle which resulted in the devastation of the farm land and crops of the one on whose farm it was eventually killed.

"As the great giraffe fell under the heavy shots of this band of hunters, they gave a big shout which attracted the attention of other villagers to the scene of the incident. As they arrived, they noticed that the struggle to mow down the giant animal had led to the destruction of crops and plants in the farms and surrounding areas. While they rejoiced that a big animal had been killed, they also consoled the host whose crops and plants have suffered tremendous damage. The cost was considered so huge because the planting season comes only once in a year and to lose one's crop for a year means to go hungry for that period of time unless one receive assistance from neighbours. The impact this might have not only on the immediate household of the host, but also on the community in general during the harvest season is better imagined than described, and so everything is done to support the lucky one".

In order to make up for the losses sustained by the host and the negative impact it might have on the survival of his household and the community at harvest time, the following principle of sharing the slain animal is usually adopted as reflected in the statements 1 - 3 below:

INFERENCES (F), TRANSLATIONS (T), AND PRINCIPLES (P)

The win-win principle

10 A Dane gun is made of wooden canon and hollow metal pipes fitted into a trigger barrel into which gunpowder and sharp missiles are stacked. It explodes when the trigger is pulled and its spring-barrel hits at the gunpowder to cause an explosion through the hollow metal pipe and so unleashing the missiles on its target. Dane guns were in vogue in Ogba and Ekpeye before colonialism.

(F) Enye Igolo wani awani ya ornu ma ohna le gbakata lea gbu bumehni enye omani mma, enye agadima ihni oma kpo. Hne ruma kwirizu olo, okodigre icho hne iribe irni acho.

(T) The one in whose farm land the giraffe emerges and gets killed by the men of the community has become the fortunate and is the favoured one. For many days his family shall not be in any kind of want because of abundant meat that will be available to them.

(P) The host gets the leading share to make up for his crops and plants.

The principle of compensation

(F) Odani ohna wo gbu anu ya ornu ga, ehne o bo vokirekama wo ya oda osotari wo, odi wo enye ani nwe ornua ituwheshimani oke. Ma aya adidigu ika iri oke anua – ishi ga, odudu ga ya okpashi ga bumagre ka ay'egnini. M'abu ori oke ya ede odua, ma abu nde oke tunijepoa wo tuniwheshima wo sagbe imebichinia hne nde otashinia wo ya ornu duba ya uka ka Igolo ani o gbu wo ya okwu ornu ga.

(T) Everyone who took part in the killing of the animal, will share in its meat according to the order of seniority, whereas the host, that is the one in whose farm land the giraffe finally emerged and was killed, will receive a three-fold share. The animal head and tail automatically will belong to him, along with his own main share, and the hunters also contribute from their own shares to him as compensation for the damages done to his farm land during the struggle that ensued before the "giraffe" was eventually killed.

(P) In this way equity, justice and fair play is maintained and perpetrated within the community and in the homes. Then the host can make up for the crops and plants which he has lost and can be sustained along with his family with sufficient meat until the next planting and harvest season.

The principle of good neighbourliness

(F) Agadima ishi ikne ya olewheri ya mmegbu adi gbe ma o bu ka ma o sno wo gbu anu ba lepo ornu ede ani o gbu wo Igoloa gbadebe gbe, le enye nwea tunikwna oke ntiyi, le owhuru anu vokirema ma enye nwe ornu ka ri hne o gbu wo ya ornu ga. Ogamara o bu wa o ko dia y'ehne ani o gbu wo ka bu anu gbe. Ma nde ajuju digu o'ju lea wo kejeni oke ba dudia ma o bu hne o dia, legu wo go oke ga nigaa. Ya egwnade hne o dikwnabirie wo o'me bu ituwheshimania oke, ma nde obu so uso digua wo otuni ka ori irni ka enye igolo wani ya okwu ornu!

(T) It is a very great wickedness, mistreatment, and scorn for those who (together with him) killed the "giraffe" to share the gains from the animal, abandon the farm land where the animal finally emerged and was killed, and to simply compensate the owner in small ways.

(P) People have to be fair and equitable because no one knows on whose door fortune could knock tomorrow, and what one did to others can be done to him or her.

The principles of win-win, compensatory use of land, and good neighbourliness enunciated above derives from the "giraffe principle" of sharing. It implies a desirable situation in which the government, company and communities are collectively involved in a joint effort to ensure

that host communities in particular and the Niger Delta in general are made co-sharers of the benefits deriving from the "kill" obtained from their land. The general understanding of the inhabitants of the oil producing communities is that, the "giraffe principle" should be applied in sharing. Rather than the obnoxious principle of a 13% (some demand a 25%) derivative share – all intended to benefit the host communities. Three ways in which the "giraffe" principle works out are:

Firstly, by providing those living and doing business in the "oil bearing" regions with adequate health care facilities, social welfare amenities, education and craft-making utilities, so as to enhance the physical health, moral integrity, socio-economic and psychological advancement of host communities while at the same time investing in a programme of revamping the farm lands, rejuvenating the ecological structure, and refurbishing the environment. This is crucial if the "curse" of a distorted ecology, environmental pressure and impoverished farm lands will be lifted from the area along with the oil (Frynas 2005:591-98).

Secondly, by a direct capital and infrastructural investment in the affected land or host communities using some fraction of the gains accruing to both company and government from the land so used. This will be done for their social, economic and sustainable development and wellbeing, so that when the oil assets become depleted, as most natural resources do with time, the livelihood of host communities may not be impaired (O'Neill 2007:111-113).

Thirdly, by sharing the oil revenue not in trickles, but in bulks so as to actually involve the inhabitants of host communities at the grass roots level, using each affected nuclear family as a point of contact. This can be done through economic empowerment, skill development and gainful self-employment.

CONCLUSION

A re-definition of stewardship based on the peoples' self understanding and on the "giraffe principle" of win-win, compensatory use of land, and good neighbourliness can go a long way to define the roles of community, company and government with respect to the sharing and distribution of wealth accruing from oil and natural gas in Nigeria. It is based on a gerontocratic ethic which recognizes the divine origin of all land and natural resources. The discovery of oil the Niger Delta is compared to a beast which suddenly invades one's agricultural space. Oil is a giraffe unexpectedly emerging in the agricultural and marine space of the Niger Delta, and now caught in the web of multi-national oil companies operating in this same region. The obligation rests on the stakeholders or "users" of the land through which fortune has come to Nigeria to religiously observe the "giraffe principle" of win-win, compensatory use, and of good neighbourliness in order to ensure clean air, freedom of persons, green environment and sustainable development in Ogba and Ekpeye, and indeed in the Niger Delta as a whole.

At this present time, the oil is being exploited like the butchering of a giraffe by stakeholders through the combined efforts of multinational oil companies, State and Federal government agencies, and community leaders to name a few! The Niger Delta giraffe or mineral oil deposits are presently being exploited by multinational companies in collaboration with government agencies in a way which totally ignores the environmental impact laws and the ecological integrity of the Niger Delta. In the process Ogba and Ekpeye land like other parts of the Niger Delta region have been and is still being devastated and polluted in the ongoing "struggle" to get the oil, like the "struggle" resulting in the death of the giraffe. The sharing of the "gains of oil" is likened to the sharing of "the meat" from the giraffe and is being done without the interest of oil bearing communities in mind.

The thesis of the "giraffe" principle is that those in whose land the oil benefits are derived

should receive a leading share in such benefits, followed by those who provided the weapons for killing the animal, and last but not the least are the shares to all those whose interest was involved in the ensuing struggle. In other words, the government by providing the enabling socio-political environment for industrial and agricultural activities to go on, are co-sharers but certainly not the principal sharers in the gains from the "kill" as is presently being done by the Nigerian government. The present situation in which all royalties and gains accrue to government in what is described as "derivation" is a "graft" not the "giraffe" principle known for ages in Africa.

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