

The Paradox of Paradise and the Frail Realities in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria

By

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Abstract

This paper engages the medium of photography, specifically of Timi-Amah.: a noted photographer of the Niger delta. In a visual documentation therefore, the fragile eco environment of ecosystem in the Niger delta region of Nigeria is visually documented. This is clearly intandem to the much resonated call to reconsider the Niger delta ecosystem which has become antithesis of the paradise it once was. Amah's photographic practice is concentration on the level of environmental degradation arising from forms of civil disobedience summarised in militant activities. Amah's visual narratives thus unravels the attendant impact on the environment and the plight that constitutes the Niger deltas ecological space. This narrative focuses therefore, on this papers focus. The photographic natratives thusly report the paradox of the paradise in the paradise of the Niger delta once was.

Keywords: Paradox, Paradise, photographic narrative toolings.

Introduction

Timi Armah belongs to a body of photographers who have vested upon themselves to visually document the fragile but rapidly degenerating ecosystem in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria. Armah confers an activist dimension to his photographic oeuvre on the Niger Delta in so doing. This is clearly in tandem to the much-resonated call to reconsider the Niger Delta ecosystem which has become an antithesis of the paradise it once was. A special focus of Armah's photographic practice is his concentration on the coverage of levels of environmental degradation arising from forms of civil disobedience summarised

in militant activities. Amah's visual narratives, thus unravels their attendant impact on the environment, and the plight that constitutes the Niger Delta's ecological space. Within this focus therefore, this paper considers selected photographs of Amah that bring to consciousness the frail realities that are the outcome of the activities therefrom by the uncontrolled and individual profit driven ventures, in the guise of civil disobedience to the detriment of the paradise that once was of cultural and environmental value. It is important also to recall that beyond the activities of the artisanal refineries which these photographs document and the illegal oil explorations, licensed multinationals also plead guilty to the ravaged landscape of the Niger delta

Within this focus the photographs become tools that instigate consciousness, driven by the photographer. Amah's practice as a photographer resounds similarly with Susan Sontag's proposition that to photograph is to confer importance.¹ Importance here begets value for what is photographed – the photographic content. Thus, the content of these photographs is freighted with the obligation to generate transformative agendas to a proper repositioning of the region. From the last couple of decades to the present, the creeks of the Niger Delta have come to represent the economic future to a monolithic economy that is Nigeria. This excessive exploitation and the after effect have become subject of discourses in other print formats in the past, and all these have yielded only but limited results. The photographic image hence surface as an icon to generate a montage of visual documentaries that not only highlight the extent of the damage to the ecosystem, but also to imbue in the consciousness of environmental activists the urgency to counteract these forms of insurgence to the environment. It therefore arouses our consciousness to the future, leaving to us to ponder our futures. The relevance of the photographs in these futuristic reconstructions especially in the Niger Delta, will certainly depend on how these body of photographs are accepted, how adequately the grim messages they convey are interpreted, and how responsive stakeholders are to the matter. However, in the time being, the photographer more like a hermeneut understands the past more like Jonathan Green's photographs would, and like Timi Amah surfaces to link the expanse of time, revealing to us what indeed the future holds considering current situations concerning the region, such that a rejuvenation is imperative.

Representing paradise and degrading landscapes

Timi Armah's body of photographs concentrates on the reality of the Niger Delta. This reality as Sontag postulates has always been interpreted through reports tethered to the photographic image.¹ The reality hence consists dominantly of degraded landscapes and the various agencies that finance such degradations. In other instances, one can juxtapose living conditions in the region against these patterns of degradation and fear for what the future holds for the region. In this section, I aim to consider Timi Armah and a selected body of photographs, which will be read. Therefore, his works to be read within the above context remain complementary in locating him in the practice of photography in Nigeria. His indigent status as a native of Twon Brass and Nembe, all in Bayelsa state is evocative of his position as insider observer, growing up to witness the environmental abuse surfacing around him. Born in 1969 to an artist father, he studied Fine arts as well, graduating in the then College of Education and the University of ***** in 1990 and 1998 respectively. Armah is more of a freelancer than an advanced photographer, who from point he incepted photography loved representing the outdoors. He remarks quite defiantly, "with this equipment, I have been able to explore my environment, and express myself".

Armah's photographs in relation to what they represent falls within Abigail Salomon Gudea proposition in the Finnish photographic year book of 1991 as holding a dual identity that traverse the iconic and indexical compartments of sign within the framework of Piercean semiotic model. As iconic signs, the signifier/signified relationship that exists between the photographs and what they represent becomes direct, a mirror image of the other. Subjectivity, art and beauty form the axis the works within this genre are situated. As an index, the photographs become documentary and representative. The photographs in this case, now function as evidence that alludes to, and stand in for what it actually represents, thus truth, objectivity and science form the axis of the indexical. When describing the works, interpretive evaluation will be carried out with due consideration to the genre the photographs belong. It merits a mention here that some of Armah's photographs reveal landscapes that seemly pass for paradise. While this is true, such photographs search to accentuate the reality when the degraded ecosystem is placed alongside. The paradise images serve beyond how

much they endear, to compare the rapid change in the transformation of lush ecosystem to rabid degradation. The activist stance of these photographs, and the silent meanings they unravel breaths the message Armah calls attention to. In the above regard, a broader field of social-ecological critique and interrogations in a periscope of the Actor-Network Theory (ANT) reconceptualized in the concept of environmental stewardship as a heterogeneous network of humans and other-than-human citizens within the context of eco-ethics is pertinent here. Bruno Latour's Eco-Philosophy and the Climate Justice Programme (2018) is pertinent here (cf. Demos 2013)

The Niger Delta exists as the largest wetlands in Africa, and the third in the world. It covers an area of about 70,000m, and consists of a number of ecological zones- sandy coastal ridge barrier, brackish or saline mangroves, fresh water, permanent and seasonal swamp and low inland rain forest. It is a complex and fragile system of wet lands and dry lands of which the 20,000m are seasonally flooded zones, tidal and swamp areas.⁴ This variegated ecosystem is of course laden with crude, whose exploration and disregard for the environment that host them, has become a grimly fitting synonym for the region beginning from the 1950s. This has resulted in enormous environmental issues, ethnic conflicts and a sustained wave of militant activities. The indigenous populace has seen little or no improvement in their standards of living, upon the seemingly irreversible spate of abuse their immediate environment faces. Consider for example the in orderly manner with which pipeline networks wind their way across farm lands, waterways, fishing grounds and even communities and residential areas. On this, the integrity of these facilities is scarcely monitored to prevent corrosion and bursts. Usually, they hold out their lifespan and gives way, causing a deluge of oil spills and fires that consume humans and the environment alike. Accordingly, federal government figures recall about 7000 individual oil spills between 1970 and 2000. In a vengeful twist, the region now experiences the growth of incessant proliferation of local mushroom refineries dotting the whole landscape, and a scale of kidnap of foreign nationals, and the vandalization of oil facilities, the dangers are been flung up. This, an act of civil disobedience, considering the environmentally unfriendly methods, the hazard, and the poorly refined state of the products combine to make matters more complex. It is thus estimated that a clean-up within the scale of a full restoration of the ecosystem will take about 25 years.

Armah documentary photographs belong to the environmental action advocacy where Latour, as referenced above advocates for human agents to put out positive actions in defence of non-human agents - the environment. His approach to creating this awareness goes beyond violence, and further environmental pollution. His strategy is one that upholds the sanity of the region. His photographs which are affirmative of sustained environmental abuse condemn in like manner as they frown at the failure of the active players to re-chart a course to reposition the region and its badly ravaged ecosystem for the better. Recall the iconic/indexical paradigm afore-mentioned, I proceed to engage selected two works presented, to fashion an anticipatory course for the future. Semiotics, alongside iconography remains my methodological tools of engagement.

The photographs that fall under the indexical cadre bear witness as much as they testify, they are evidential, more so they advocate, and mediate the divide between inaction and action. They are ethical, and try to raise questions regarding phenomena. Terry Barret succinctly puts it, "they praise or condemn aspects of society. They show things ought, or ought not to be, they are usually politically engaged..."⁷ The photograph in the iconic cadre is aesthetically charged. It conforms to Barrett's classification of the beautiful photograph. These also consist of landscapes.⁸ Emphasis here revolves round the appeasement of the sensuous, and scarcely anything beyond that.



Figure 1. Discharging Habor for Stolen Crude Oil

The photograph shows a scene that depicts one of the stages of the local refinement of the petroleum products. Occupying the picture frame are plastic drums in the water and on the high land. At the right corner of the frame, is lifeless and charred remains of a tree. A portable yellow pumping machine, sits at the edge, with a green hose running down in to the water below. The ground hosting all of these objects remains caked with soot and oil. The usually dark and murky waters of the mangrove swamps succumb to a bleached look, arising from constant spills. At the recess of the photograph, thick soot billows skywards. The vegetation within the immediate axis of the photographs is all but gone, while the thick bushes remain at the background.

The large plastic drums are empty, and waiting to take on cooled refined products. The pumping machine though seemingly not in actual use here, pumps the product into the drums. Thereafter these drums are role by workers into the water for easy loading into specially constructed boats for delivery to a booming illegal bunkering market. The stages that abound from the point oil facilities are vandalised for raw crude to the finished products represents a complex network of roles and hierarchies. Usually, very rich people reside at the top of the pyramid, and own the refineries. They recruit trusted, but dangerous individuals to man the camps. These people in turn recruit about a dozen men who carry out the duties of refining. The turnover of these illegal bunkering activities is quite lucrative, because of the presence of a voracious market, necessitated by scarcities from legal government owned refineries, and a relatively high price. The volatility of the products is compensated by the cheap amount they are been sold.

While an appreciable amount of effort has been put to stop these illegal bunkering activities, the results are meagre. Diverse forms of sabotage from security and law enforcement agents through the acceptance of huge bribes seem to slow down government's effort at an eradication agenda. The level of degradation of the environment is beyond words, and still ongoing. The death toll arising from camp fires is now beyond count, coupled with how fast the landscapes gets transformed from green to blackened barren lands. The dangers are now closer to humans now more than ever. These illegal refinery camps continue to shift, not into the outlands, but inland, close to human residences. This is where Armah's photographs become more revealing. Sadly, the perpetrators soon get

overpowered by greed, to the detriment of the ecosystem, without consideration of its future implications.



Figure 2. An Unsavoury Sight of a Degraded ecosystem from Crude Oil Spillage



Figure 3. An Artisanal Refinery Site and its Environmental Impact



Figure 4.



Figure 5. Water Front in a Niger Delta Community by Timi Amah

Figure 4 and 5 is an epitomise calmness, serenity and aesthetically charged. It shows a clear blue sky, a beach, and a patch of land with greens. It is unpolluted,

and goes very much for paradise. But this scene only represents the proverbial calm before the storm. The recollection that before been abused, these landforms are this lush should serve to raise the awareness of the need for an environmental protection. Like I earlier remarked, the body of work that falls within this category, beyond the aesthetic appeal they embody, helps to measure as well as document the transformation that unravels within the period it takes for the degradation to occur.

Conclusion

The role of the photographic image in documenting historical timelines, offering mediations, and its power to make us react to issues remain one of its undying qualities. In this paper, I have constructed a connection between the role of the artist photographer, his environment, and the future he calls attention to through the creation of visualised semiotic codes. I portray the artist in this context as a Self, who through the revelations of his landscapes fits into the role of the hermeneut, and acts accordingly. Armah's photographs of the Niger Delta, as practical as they are, are born out of the desire to warn humanity to the impending repercussions that could arise considering the multiplication of negative human forces on the environment. Coming from the wake of an enormous textual attention on the area, these photographs convert such voluminous textual inferences to photographic frames that rev up the need for appropriate actions concerning the trajectory of the future.

Armah's photographs are connective between the past and the present, allowing us to have a glimpse of an environmentally degraded and a serene one. In this way they are veritable pointers to environmental action justice. These photographs offer humanity the leverage to ponder the future. Considering that the timeline of these photographs offers unethical revelations concerning our ecosystem, they also warn us to act. The failure to heed breeds nemesis. The photographs have passed on this message.

End Notes

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