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BRIDGING SOCIAL GAPS IN THE NIGER DELTA: A RELIGIOUS PERSPECTIVE**ANTHONIA M. ESSIEN, Ph.D**

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Abstract

Religion has very powerful influence in the lives of the people of the Niger Delta as it is in most parts of Africa. Therefore, this paper presents the religious perspective in bridging the gaps created by the problems of kidnappings in the Niger Delta. A total of 1100 questionnaires were administered to respondents. 937 questionnaires were returned by respondents. The results of the data analyzed revealed that the correlation of kidnapping and religious conversion of youths yields a coefficient of 0.748 ($r=0.748$), while employment and kidnapping gives $r=0.652$. The correlation coefficient for politically motivated youths and kidnapping is $r=0.677$. From these results, there exist significant linear relationship between kidnapping and religious conversion of youths, employment and kidnapping; and politically motivated youths and kidnapping at 0.01 level of significance ($p<0.01$). Therefore the research hypothesis H_{01} , H_{02} and H_{03} are all rejected at 0.01 level of significance ($p<0.01$). This implies that there is a significant relationship between youths' employment and kidnapping in the Niger Delta Region. The most significant linear relationship exists between religious conversion of youths and kidnapping in the Niger Delta Region. This paper recommends that paradigm shift in theologies of dispensationalism, faith gospel, dualism, teaching of Christian principles and non-violent mass demonstration against poor governance will bridge gaps in the Niger Delta region and usher in a new era of peaceful co-existence.

Keywords: Bridging Social Gaps; Niger Delta; Religious Perspective

Introduction

In Africa, religion plays a very significant role in the lives of the people. Imaekhai (2010, 60) describes this very succinctly:

Religion influences in a comprehensive way, the thoughts and actions of African life, fully determining practically every aspect of life including moral behavior. The African lives in a religious universe: all actions and thoughts have religious meaning and are inspired or influenced by a religious point of view.

A bird eye's view of the Niger Delta region reveals a society supersaturated mostly with Christian churches of various denominations. These churches have remained as important medium of putting significant issues across to the people. In some part of the Niger Delta, it has been observed that churches are the main 'industries' of the people. This anecdotal reference no doubt shows the central place of the churches in communication, education, social organization and control in the area. Religion plays a significant role in the lives of the people of the Niger Delta.

Apart from the apparently rich religious heritage, Niger Delta is naturally endowed with crude oil and gas which are very vital to Nigeria's economy. The petroleum industry derived from the crude oil in the Niger Delta is the backbone of Nigeria economy accounting for over 90% of the country's foreign exchange revenue and about 80% of total government revenue (NDRDMP 2006, 9). In

addition to the oil and gas, there are other natural resources also important to the nation's economy: viz: timber and non-timber forest product, agricultural resources, mineral resources, wildlife and bitumen and other mineral resources.

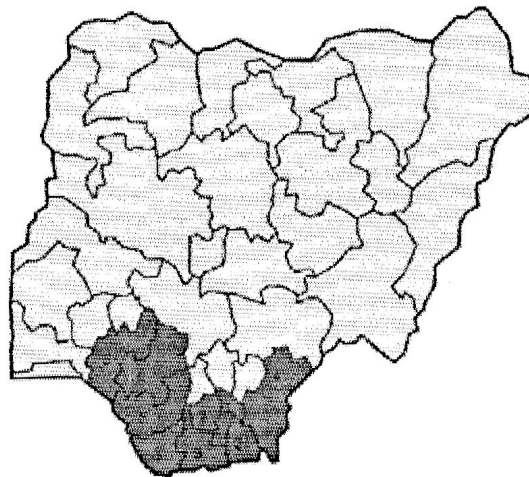
As observed by Okai (2008), the socio-economic situation of the Niger Delta Region does not reflect the huge revenues from oil and gas exploration in the region. The area is undermined by endemic poverty and gaps among people who are ranked the poorest in the world. Uyigwe (2010) also noted that the poverty in the area is frightening:

Economic activities of the people in the region include fishing, farming and trading. Very few are employed in the civil service and companies. GNP per capita in the region is below the national average of US\$280. The rural population commonly fish or practice subsistence agriculture, and supplement their diet and income with a wide variety of forest products. Education levels are below the national average and are particularly low for women. The poverty level in the Niger Delta is exacerbated by the high cost of living. In some parts of the Niger Delta, the cost of living index is the highest in Nigeria.

Again, the Niger Delta has been described as :

A place of frustrated expectations and deep mistrust where widespread restiveness frequently erupts in violence. Long years of neglect and conflict have fostered a siege mentality, especially among youths who feel they are condemned to future without hope, and see conflict, violence, theft and kidnapping as a strategic escape (MPP 9 project sheet)

The nine States officially defined as the Niger Delta are Bayelsa, Delta, Rivers, Edo, Imo, Abia, Cross River, Akwa Ibom, and Ondo States as shown in the diagram below:



1. Abia, 2. Akwa Ibom, 3. Bayelsa, 4. Cross River, 5. Delta, 6. Edo, 7. Imo, 8. Ondo, 9. Rivers

Map of Nigeria numerically showing states typically considered part of the Niger Delta region: (from Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia)

The area has a land mass of about 112.110km² (NDRDMP 2006.8) and a population of about 31 million people, over forty ethnic groups speaking 250 different dialects. The people are generally engaged in farming and fishing, the two main occupations which the tropical climate, rain forest and numerous rivers and creeks encourage (Ekpo 2004.1). Oil exploration went on for several years before the inhabitants of the Niger Delta realized how cheated they were. About the early 1990s, conflict arose in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria primarily over tensions between the foreign oil corporations and a number of the Niger Delta's minority ethnic groups. This is because, as Kekong (2008.90) rightly notes, the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria has been deeply traumatized, robbed, massacred, degraded, discriminated against and brutally exploited successfully over generations and for centuries. The oil-bearing communities of the Niger Delta region of Nigeria gradually but forcefully came to the realization that the multinational oil companies and the Federal Government of Nigeria had taken advantage of them in key areas crucial to their very existence: environmental degradation, human rights violation, political marginalization and lack of access to oil wealth produced in the region, Kekong (2008.85). The local people began to form small groups of militants and channeled their grievances wrongly to the multinationals oil companies, kidnapping their workers and demanding huge financial ransom before their release. Gradually, kidnappings became a way of life and gaps created deepened. Ekwere-madu (2009:7) rightly observed that:

Since year 2005, kidnapping have become a daily occurrence in Nigeria and now envelopes the country, including the fringes of the Sahara Desert. Unfortunately, Nigeria is on with image re-branding process and yet our ears are filled with news of rampant hostage (oil workers) and so forth to mesmerize the Federal Government ongoing campaign for the nations image re-branding... poverty and unemployment of youths have been identified as one of their potent causes...

There are two major categorizations of kidnapping in the Niger Delta: the kidnapping related to the grievances with the multinational oil companies in the Niger (*oil-related-kidnapping*) and the second and most rampant *conventional kidnapping*. Most people seem to think that this last category of kidnappings have political overtone.

The emergence of poverty in the midst of plenty in the Niger Delta, has created deep social disparities, unemployment, insensitivity to the marginalized, inequality, divergence and gaps between the people and the government, and even between the people themselves. There are incessant kidnappings and the demand for huge financial ransom from the victims before their release. These issues are a reflection of administrative neglect and the religious worldview of the people. Religious options can be used in checking these two categories of kidnappings and bridging the gaps in the region.

Motivation and the purpose for the research

It is to be noted that the problems of the Niger Delta is multifaceted, as such many approaches are to be utilized in the efforts of finding solutions to the issues. For the past five decades, the Federal Government of Nigeria has been battling with the problems developing of the Niger Delta. There has been the Willink Commission in 1957, Niger Delta Development Board in 1961, Oil Mineral Producing Areas Development Commission (OMPADEC) in 1992 and the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) in 2000. Despite all these efforts, results of development are slow, giving rise to all kinds of anti-social acts and gaps among the people.

Within the past five years, the problem of kidnapping has added another dimension to the Niger Delta issues creating more gaps and social problems. The position of this paper is that given the religious tendencies of the people, the gaps that exist in the Niger Delta can be bridged with religious options. The purpose of this paper therefore, is to present the religious options that may be utilized in bridging gaps and solving the problem of kidnappings in the Niger Delta.

Research Questions:

These research questions were used in the study.

1. In what ways can religious conversion of youths affect or influence kidnapping in the Niger Delta.
2. How does youth employment affects kidnapping in the Niger Delta.
3. What is the relationship between kidnapping and youths who are politically motivated in the Niger Delta.

Research Hypotheses:

The following hypotheses were stated for this research.

H₀₁ There is no significant relationship between kidnapping and youths employment in the Niger Delta.

H₀₂ There is no significant relationship between kidnapping and religious conversion of the youths in the Niger Delta.

H₀₃ There is no significant relationship between kidnapping and youths who are politically motivated in the Niger Delta.

The religious situation in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria

The Niger Delta is one of the areas in the West African sub-region where Christianity was successfully planted in 19th Century (Ekpo, 2004.5). But the people were not in a religious vacuum before the advent of Christianity. They practiced their indigenous religion particularly deep in the belief of a spiritual universe. The spiritual powers are to be tapped regularly to help the humans in the struggle in a mysterious universe. The kidnappers no doubt would rely on these supernatural powers to ensure they go through their operations successfully. Although the whole area is saturated with Christian churches, traditional religious practices are common among the people.

Christianity is largely practiced and is very popular among the people. The major blocs of Christians in the area are:

1. Catholics grouped under Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria (CSN)
2. 'Protestants' grouped under Christian Council of Nigeria (CCN)
3. Pentecostals grouped under Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria (PFN):
4. African Churches grouped under Organization of African Instituted Churches (OAIC)
5. Evangelicals – grouped under Evangelical Churches of West Africa (ECWA)

Apart from these main bloc, there are numerous cliental-service religious groups in the area. Taking a census of all the churches would be an onerous task as new forms keep arising everywhere and every time. It is very easy to count up to 60-70 churches in a very small town of about 4000 inhabitants. These religious groups have impacted positively in the lives of the people through humanitarian and social services to the poor, orphans, underprivileged and the marginalized, in a way bridging gaps among the people. But certain theological issues militate against their rapid work in addressing some of the gaps and kidnapping in the Niger Delta.

(a) Dispensationalism which emphasizes that the world history is divided into seven dispensations and the present age is at the end of the sixth dispensation just waiting for Jesus' return at the seventh dispensation which will bring a new age. This will be preceded by snatching up to the heavens true believers, seven years of great suffering, climaxed by the Armageddon immediately before Jesus' return. This theology encourages fatalism and an attitude of passive resignation to their plight.

(b) Faith Gospel which theologizes that no true Christian can be poor or sick; to be poor or sick is to have sinned or lacked faith. God wants his children to eat the best, wear the best clothes, drive the best cars etc. Prosperity is reduced to a matter of faith and generous giving to the preachers of the gospel- the vicar of Christ. This diverts attention from the immediate causes of the people's health problems which include inadequate access to safe water, lack of medical care as well as poverty and unemployment etc. Again this theology diverts attention from poor governance, corruption and mismanagement of the people's natural resources. The further danger of this theology is that it calls for faith and leave everything to God without considering individual societal commitment to the common good.

© Dualism encourages the framing of issues in terms of simplistic alternatives e.g either God or Satan, either this world or the next, either trust in God or reliance on self. Christians are encouraged to have as little as possible to do with this world and should flee it and avoid contamination with it. This, too, diverts attention from the ordinary causes of a political and economic nature and can leave injustice unexposed.

These theologies are partly responsible for the gaps and problems of the Niger Delta. There is need to readdress these theological emphasis in the process of finding lasting solutions to the issues of gaps in the Niger Delta of Nigeria.

Methodology:

A total of 1100 questionnaires were administered in four states of the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. 937 out of this number were returned by respondents, the socio demographic characteristics of the respondents include sex, age, educational level and Religious affiliation. A total of 449 (47.9%) respondents were male while 488 (52.1) were female. The ages of respondents were in four categories, 18-28 years, 29-38 years, 39-46 years and 55 years and above. 42.8% of the respondents were 18-23 years old, 17.3 % of respondents were 29-38 years old, 37.4 % of the respondents were in 39-40 years while 2.5% were 55 years and above. 39.5 % of the respondents had SSCE/OND as their highest qualification. 469 (50.1%) respondents possess HND/B.Sc, while 68 (7.3%) respondents are MA/Ph.D holders. Respondents with other qualifications were 3.1%. In Religious affiliation, 187 (20%) were Catholics (CSN), 373 (39.8) respondents are Pentecostal and Apostolic church members (PFN), Those that attend Methodist, Anglican, Lutheran, Qua Iboe and Presbyterian Churches (CCN) were 326 (34.5%) respondents. Respondents affiliated to Evangelical Council of West Africa (ECWA) were 4 (0.7%) while Cherubim and Seraphim/ Celestial churches (OAIC) had 14 (1.5%) respondents. Respondents in other affiliations were 33 (3.5%).

Data Analysis and Discussion

The response from the 937 respondents were summarized and subjected to statistical data analysis using Microsoft Excel, SPSS and Graph Pad Instat software. A T-test and correlation analysis were performed on the following pair of variables; employment and kidnapping; religious conversion of youths and kidnapping, politically motivated youths and kidnapping.

The result shows that the correlation of Kidnapping and religious conversion of youths yields a coefficient of 0.748 ($r=0.748$), while employment and kidnapping gives $r=0.652$. The correlation coefficient for politically motivated youths and kidnapping is $r=0.677$. From these results, there exist significant linear relationship between kidnapping and religious conversion of youths, employment and kidnapping; and politically motivated youths and kidnapping at 0.01 level of significance ($p<0.01$). Therefore the research hypothesis H_{01} , H_{02} and H_{03} are all rejected at 0.01 level of significance ($p<0.01$). This implies that there is a significant relationship between youths' employment and kidnapping in the Niger Delta Region. Also there is a significant relationship between politically motivated of youths and kidnapping in the Niger Delta Region. The most significant linear relationship exists between Religious conversion of youths and kidnapping in the Niger Delta Region. Therefore to curb kidnapping and bridge gapps in the Niger Delta region of Nigerian religious conversion of youths should be encouraged followed by employment and useful engagements for politically motivated youths.

Strategies for bridging gaps in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria: A religious standpoint

i. Emphasis on Christian values and proper teachings of the adherents.

The data from our field work points at the significant relationship between kidnapping and religious conversion. If the many religious groups in the area have members particularly youths that are truly converted and adhere to the teachings of Christianity, then the problem of kidnapping would end. It is therefore very pertinent for the numerous Christian denominations in the Niger Delta to embark on religious conversion of their members as the members are the political leaders of the Niger Delta. Good Christian political leaders can bridge gaps and end the problem of kidnapping in the region. Christianity as a religion has very good values that can stop the problem of kidnapping in the Niger Delta. At the first instance, the Ten Commandments are models for all Christians. Among other things, these commandments and the Christian ethics forbid stealing, bribery, kidnappings, corruption, mismanagement of funds, greed, avariciousness, materialism, killings, and emphasize values like honesty, obedience, justice, fair play, and good neighbourliness. If the leaders and the people of the Niger Delta imbibe these Christian principles, the problem of kidnapping will end and gaps will be bridged.

ii. Resisting contributions from members whose sources of income are unclear

To bridge gaps and stop the problems of kidnapping, churches should resist financial contributions from members whose sources of income are doubtful.

iii. Justice Development

Religious leaders in the Niger Delta need to intensify their activities in justice development. As long as the people do not experience justice, the problem of the Niger Delta will persist.

iv. Paradigm shift in theological emphasis for social development

For religion in the Niger Delta to be effectively used in bridging gaps and curbing the problem of kidnappings, there is need for a paradigm shift in the theologies of Dispensationalism, Faith Gospel

and Dualism described above. There is need of a change in the attitude of Christians of the Niger Delta. Rather than the numerous religious groups emphasizing on miraculous interventions in nearly all aspects of life, focusing their attention on the Devil and the ills he has done to humanity (Marshall, 2009:4), the government should be questioned and challenged for unemployment, marginalization, poverty and gaps in the religion.

v. Non-violent mass demonstration against poor governance

Ehusani (1996:104) presents a position that is worth adopting and could be very useful in the Niger Delta situation:

It is important for us Christians to know that we are not helpless in the face of evil...The world has seen many forms of peaceful resistance that are efficacious. We know of peaceful demonstrations and protest marches by which a group of people that have been denied their rights along with their sympathizers make a public outcry against the authorities on the streets, flashing protest placards and singing protest songs. This method was used very much by the oppressed Negroes of the United States under the dynamic leadership of Dr. Martin Luther King (Jr) who was a Baptist Minister. It proved to be a very effective method too in Apartheid South Africa under the leadership of Bishop Desmond Tutu, Cardinal Sin of Manila led a successful revolution of the people that brought an end to the oppressive rule of President Ferdinand Marcos, using the instrument of mass demonstrations that are non-violent.

The numerous religious leaders in the Niger Delta should use this option to protest to the government about the degradation, poverty and unemployment of youths and other gaps of social disparity existing in the region.

vi. Using Abraham's example (Gen 14:11-16)

Refusal to pay ransom to kidnapers may be a yard-stick to ending the problem of kidnapping in the Niger Delta. Christians in the area may wish to opt for the Abraham's example in dealing with the problem of kidnapping. When Lot the nephew of Abraham and the women and children were kidnapped, Abraham refused to pay ransom. He rather pursued the kidnapers and brought back Lot, the women and the people. Christians in various towns and villages can form vigilante groups to fish out the kidnapers.

vi. Churches and the Government collaboration

The government could support the church to open and run rehabilitation/skill acquisition centres. This will take care of desperate people who are jobless and then see kidnapping as a lucrative job. The people often time believe more in their religious leaders than the government. Therefore, the government should help the Christian church build non-denominational skill acquisition centres to be supervised and run by church leaders for the good of the members.

vii. Prophetic stance against poor governance

The incessant kidnapping problem in the Niger Delta clearly shows that the region is suffering from administrative neglect and poor governance. Religious leaders therefore would be powerful instrument in bridging the gap in the situation when law enforcement and governance is still evolving. The religious leaders need courage to confront the government on issues of poor

governance. The followers of Christ are mandated in the New Testament scripture to be “salt of the earth” (Matthew 5:13).

Conclusion

The religious leaders and the religious people of the Niger Delta region should learn to question the government on the reasons for gaps, social disparity, poverty, and kidnapping in a region that has been so naturally endowed with crude oil. This is to say that the government should be made to explain the reasons for unemployment, poor health facilities and so on. There is no need to focus their attention on the Devil and the ills he has done to humanity when it is obvious that the nation’s resources are mismanaged. For instance, there is no need to expect God’s intervention in health when healthy living life style is not respected. Social services to the unemployed people, the marginalized should be the responsibility of the government and the religious people should be the voice of the voiceless . The rate for seeking for miracles will be reduced drastically and emphasis can then be placed on personal transformation which will lead to total resolution of the gaps experienced in the region. In other words, de-spiritualization of issues and passing blame of poor governance and mismanagement to Satan and witches are unnecessary. Throughout the history of Christianity, the power of religion is undoubtedly obvious. Religion is a powerful instrument which can be utilized for good course in ending the social problems and bridging gaps of the Niger Delta.

Nigerians in the Niger Delta Region, are mostly Christian and they belong to one denomination or another. It is very unfortunate that it is in this region that we have the greatest number of kidnapping in Nigeria. Religious leaders can embark on religious programmes and reforms aimed at educating their members on true Christian principles to stop kidnappings and bridge gaps in the society.

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