

GST 113

NIGERIA PEOPLES & CULTURE

Sarah AJIYA
Cordelia CLAYTON
Tobi JOHNSON
Dinatu B. TANKO
Felix ODOFIN
Cynthia M. SAIDU

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LESSON 11

THE CULTURE AREA OF THE NIGER DELTA REGION OF NIGERIA

Who Are The Niger Delta People?

The Ijaw, the Ndoki, the Odual, the Isoko, the Urhobo, the Abual and the Itsekiri are generally called the Niger Delta people. Geographically speaking, the Niger Delta Region is that area of Nigeria which begins from the immediate South of Edo and Igbo lands to the Atlantic Ocean, ranging from the South-East of Yorubaland to certain parts of the Efik and the Ibibio areas. The different ethnic groups that constitute Niger Delta Region are generally described as minorities. Although most of these ethnic groups belong to the Kwa language family, only the Urhobo and the Isoko people speak the same language. Fishing is the major occupation for those that live entirely within the mangrove and fresh water areas. Those located in the immediate hinterland combine fishing with the cultivation of root crops. The recent stage of their culture history shows the Urhobo as great traders while the communities of Itsekiri, Bonny and Opobo have established themselves as the middlemen of the oil trade.

THE SOCIO-POLITICAL ORGANIZATION OF THE NIGER-DELTA PEOPLE

The socio-political organization of the Niger-Delta people is strongly established on the basis of village groups or clans. The Itsekiri constitute the only exception. Many ethnic groups of the Niger Delta Region rely on their dialects and are eager to develop them. This is especially the case in the Urhobo area.

History tells us that the Ijaw have over forty village groupings, the Urhobo, twenty-two; Isoko, sixteen, etc. You should remember that each of these groupings has its political institutions and autonomy. In the past, these groupings could enter into war against one another. It is recorded that in the past, some of these groupings rose to the status of kingdoms, a number of which have fairly long histories. History also tells us that unlike the Edo, the Yoruba and the Igbo, the people of the Niger Delta Region have never been builders of empires. And they have never nurtured any great ambition to dominate others. Indeed, the most common political trait of the Niger Delta people is the democratic republican spirit and the basic political unit is the village. The clan or village group is a confederation, and the whole of the ethnic group is something merely of a cultural community. It is recorded that in the Niger Delta Region, the Itsekiri represents the only kingdom that does not have to grapple with the political problems arising from internal fragmentation, multiple dialects and so forth.

The Religious Beliefs of the Niger Delta People

Despite the varieties of different ethnic groups in the Niger Delta Region, it is striking to note that they all believe in the existence of a Supreme God. For instance, in Isoko and Urhobo, the Supreme God is called Oghene while the Ijaw call him Tamara or Egbesu. The Supreme God is called Oritsenebuwe or Oriste in Itsekiri.

However, the Niger Delta people have and believe in many deities. The prominent ones are gods and goddesses of the waters. Olokun also called Umalokun or “mami water” is the most generally known goddess in the Niger Delta region. “Mami water” is well known as the bride of the seas. Any genuine Niger Delta person considers waters, that is, the rivers, the creeks, the lakes and especially the Atlantic Ocean itself, as cities populated by not only fishes but also

whole communities of deities and water spirits. You should also know that witchcraft belief is very pronounced in the Niger-Delta region. Consequently, ritual ways of dealing with ritual-related issues abound. It is also recorded that it is the belief in witchcraft and the question of how to solve it that speeded the establishment and the rise of “Igbo” religious groups especially in Urhobo and Isoko areas. You should also remember that in the Niger Delta region, the Ijaw are best known as professional masseurs and physiotherapists, but they know next to nothing about magic, divination and herbalism.

The Arts of the Niger Delta People

Unlike the Yoruba, the Igbo and especially the Bini, the Niger Delta people are not famous for great works of art. Perhaps their ecological limitations did not encourage such artistic orientation. Nevertheless, this does not mean that Niger Delta people do not know anything about arts and crafts. Of course, the ecological situation of the region does not favour certain crafts and skills such as iron smelting, bronze works, the manufacture of glass beads, the terra cotta tradition and the textile industry, etc. However, the Niger Delta people are rather professional in the domains of canoe making, salt production, ceramics, etc. Besides, the Ijaw, the Itsekiri, the Urhobo and the Isoko have proved their best skills in the oil palm production technology. History also tells us that cloth weaving in the Aboh area diffused to parts of Isoko and Urhobo areas.

Also music and dance constitute an immense contribution of the Niger Delta region to the overall heritage of the Nigeria nation. It is recorded that most of these dances and music have formed the cultural background of some of the young dancers and musicians of today. It is well known that the late Rex Lawson had derived much of his inspiration from his native Kalabari Ijaw music. This is also true of Okupa in Isokoland, Sally Young and Mike Okri in the Ukhukori and Ughelli areas of Urhoboland.