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# Music and Poetry Representations of Oil Exploration, Honey Bee (Dis)Placement and Endangerment in the Niger Delta of Nigeria

Olusegun Stephen Titus 

## Introduction

Environmental degradation through oil exploration is a recurring global phenomenon which raises some fundamental questions about the general wellbeing and safety of animate and inanimate beings as well as the natural environment in modern society. Recent findings revealed that oil spillage, gas flaring, insecticides and pesticides are becoming the greatest things that affect bees (Timsar, 2015; Valbuena et al., 2011). Against this backdrop, the representation of oil exploration and honey bees' endangerment in Nigerian popular music, chants and poems has not been adequately engaged. The study is motivated by the desire to fill this critical gap and, in the process, provide an informed critical assessment of the effects of oil exploration on the continued survival on honey bees.

There is a strong relationship between forms of cultural productions such as music, chants, and poems and the ways in which they serve as arts of resistance. These seem to have been generally utilized by social activists in their unrelenting bid at creating awareness and promoting environmental sustainability. The choice of Nigerian popular music, chants and poems for this study is premised on the discourse of honey bees, and oil exploitation narratives that are noticeable in them. This study engages with Rob Nixon's concept of slow violence and environmentalism of the poor in which the texts of songs and chants are used to explain global environmental degradation. This gives some insights into the problems and values of the Niger Delta region of Nigeria as a signifier of global environmental crisis. The emphasis in the study is the new direction of Niger Delta music, chants, and poems

on the environment and specifically on honey bees especially as the same resonate in the works of these selected artists.

This study employs ethnographic research design. It also includes textual analysis. The study was conducted between 2016 and 2019. It entails interviews of some community members in Niger Delta where oil has displaced honey bees. Songs and poems of the following singers and poets that represent honey bees were also analysed, Niyi Adedokun, Akin Ogundokun, Nneka Egbuna, Ubrei-Joe Jeru Ojaide tanure and Idem Emmanuel Etop Poems. The selection of Niyi Adedokun and Akin Ogundokun was based on the fact though they were not Niger Delta indigenes their songs traverse beyond their southwestern Nigeria spaces and resonate the discourse on bees and environmental degradation in Niger Delta. Furthermore, participant-observation were used in gathering data from selected members of some of the oil producing states namely Ondo, Rivers and Edo states. The analysis is based on ecomusicology, which is the study of music, culture, sound and nature in a period of environmental crisis as proposed by Allen and Dawe (2016).

The Niger Delta is made up, by some estimates, of over sixty ethno-linguistic groups with the Ijaw representing the largest ethnic group. The Niger Delta is the delta of the Niger river sitting directly on the Gulf of Guinea on the Atlantic Ocean in Nigeria. It is typically considered to be located within nine coastal southern Nigerian states, which include: all six states from the South-South geopolitical zone, one state (Ondo) from South West geopolitical zone and two states (Abia and Imo) from South East geopolitical zone.

Africa's most extensive wetlands are in the Niger Delta, the centre of Nigeria's oil production with approximately 2.5 million barrels of oil produced every day (Bassey, 2013; Okuyade, 2011; Timsar, 2015).

After more than fifty years of oil production in the Delta, the resulting land, air, and water pollution (gas flaring, spills, leaks from old infrastructure) are choking the Delta's vast ecosystem and habitats. The health costs, loss of livelihood is immeasurable. Organized armed resistance was mounted by Ijaw youths in the late 1990s after the realization that the more peaceful means employed by the Ogoni environmental and human rights activist Ken Saro-Wiwa had resulted in his 1995 execution along with eight colleagues by the Sani Abacha regime. Saro-Wiwa's much-publicized death (as much as his work) precipitated the birth of "a thousand Ken Saro-Wiwas" across and beyond the Niger Delta including poets and singers.

## *Ecomusicology as a Field of Theoretical Engagement*

Ecomusicology informs the study because it emphasizes the triangularity of culture, environment and human beings (Allen et al., 2014; Allen & Dawe, 2016). The theory informs this study on how music helps in recreating a more sustainable environment. Ecomusicology is unique in that it draws on the value and significance of the lost habitats of animal lives like bees through oil exploitation activities. Ecomusicology as a theory that drives this paper explains the sounding scape of nature and the honey bee narratives of the selected music and poems. From the selected song texts and sound used in this paper, the musical elements such as melodic movements, harmonic structures,

key centres, rhythms, and the musical forms mostly call, and response explains the landscaping of the cultural scape at the trajectories of honey bees, birds, ants and other natural elements situated within the cultural milieu (Vidal, 2004).

Pedelty's (2013, p. 44) assertion that "ecological matters have clear relevance to the world of popular music," is also true of popular music on Niger Delta in Nigeria. Tailor and Hurley's (2014) work explains the global problems and specifically enumerates the place of music in the discourse of environmental issues. The current paper extends the discourse on music, nature, and culture with the focus on how human activities and the Anthropocene with capitalocene exploitation affect insects, birds and vegetations in the Niger Delta. This has great effects on habitats resulting in honey bees being displaced due to oil exploitation (Bassey, 2013). Rees (2016) examines ecological songs that may be termed as original in the wake of modernization in China. In her landmark research on music and the mediation of traditional ecological knowledge, Rees highlights the sudden awareness of ecological songs in China. Rees (2016, p. 80) references a wealth of current concerns over the environment, social change, and disappearing traditional arts, thereby tapping into a sense of nostalgia for a more locally rooted past. The current study on honey bee narratives and displacements is apt because the ecological habitat displaced is caused through humancentric chauvinistic activities in the Niger Delta.

Honey bees (Hymenoptera: Apidae) are social insects with a unique feature of division of labour. In different parts of the world, different species and subspecies of honey bees are cultured to produce honey and beeswax (Cely-Santos & Philpott, 2019; Fasasi et al., 2011; Ojeleye, 1999). In Nigeria, however, beekeeping is recently gaining the attention of The Nigerian entomologists through intensive research to improve honey and beeswax production. There is limited documented information on the honey bee apocalyptic and endangerment through oil and gas flaring in Niger Delta. This will encourage the growth of commercial apiaries for increased honey production in Nigeria. The Niger Delta is supposed to be a hub of honey bee colonies. However, oil production has displaced the honey bees. This is because most of the forest and the trees where the honey bees live have been deforested through spillage and gas flaring. These acts have done much damage to honey bee farming in Niger Delta.

In an interview Mr Christopher (June 15th 2021) notes that the advent of oil exploration brought untold devastation to honey bees in Niger Delta and especially among the Ogoni people. He stated that honey bees well flourished in Niger Delta area due to the vast forestation and the conducive climate favourable to breeding the honey bees. He further noted that bees were produced and well situated in colonies within the Niger Delta due to the abundance of the rain forest and swampy environment that help them thrive in the area. This production and relationship with honey bees prior to oil discovery made Niger Delta area great lovers and farmers in honey bees. Honey bees are also beneficial insects helpful in the cross pollination of crops. All these relationships and activities with honey bees were truncated through the exploitation and exploration of crude oil in Niger Delta. The next subthemes examine songs, chants and poems that explain these ideals and how the people connect their emotions to the lost honey bees and their resilience for sustainability.

The impact of biodiversity loss and honey bees displacement through increases in oil production is therefore monumental. In an interview with Kate (June 14<sup>th</sup>, 2021) she notes that Ogoni land was a major hub for beekeeping and farming before the advent of oil exploitation in Niger Delta. This is evident through the sale of honey bees to other parts of Nigeria and stability of farmers that engaged farming in both fishing and beekeeping. The possibility of honey bee farming is due to heavy tropical and deep forested land in the area. The displacement of bees and reduction of honey bee farming started when the multinational oil companies in collaboration with the government started deforesting the Niger Delta through cutting down the trees in the forest to make way for oil pipes and oil wells in different parts of Niger Delta. This singular act has

brought massive increase in the importation of honey bees from other parts of the world to Nigeria. With its economic and capital flights which further impoverish the bee farmers in the area. This is in concert with a Channel Television news report (September 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2018) on the need to encourage the production of more bees in Nigeria. However, the impact of loss of habitat would be a great hindrance to the effectiveness of honey bee farming in Nigeria especially in Niger Delta due to the pollutions. The next subthemes will examine songs, chants and poems that explains these ideal and how the people connect their emotions to the lost and the resilience for sustainability

Niyi Adedokun is a gospel artist whose song represents the relationship of bees to religious issues. Beyond the religious representation, the song explains the death of bee as a form of apocalypse of habitats that were displaced. Though not from the Niger Delta area of Nigeria, Niyi Adedokun's song gives some hint on the life of the honey bee, the colony and its death which is relevant to the Niger Delta honey bee narratives. He rightly notes the *Araba* in the forest where honey bees breed naturally. Regrettably these are being destroyed in the fires and oil spillages in the Niger Delta and by extension, in Nigeria. Deforestation is gaining ground which further compounds the calamitous state of honey bees.

Agricultural products in Niger Delta are terribly impacted by oil spillage. This greatly affects the existence of not just the honey bees, but other insects and birds in Niger Delta wildlife. Ogaga Okuyade (2018) in a conference presentation and personal interaction narrated the tragedy befalling a region destroyed by oil which has led to death of bird and insects like bees. Niger Delta spaces have witnessed catastrophic destructions through oil spillage and gas flaring.

**Table 1.** Themes in Songs, Chants and Poetry on honey bee in Niger Delta.

Oyin so adun nu	Honey bees lost the sweetness
Oyin oyin oyin oyin	Honey bees honey bees honey bees
Oyin so adun nu O deni yeye	Honey bee lost its sweetness and became useless
Idi abajo iku oyin	the reasons for the death of honey bees
Nile pepe	found on the ground
E ya mi leti yin o ke fi gbo	Please listen to me very carefully
Tani komagbara	Everyone is aware of the usefulness
ti oyin ni lowo	and strength of honey bee
Igi araba nla	Big Araba trees
to ba to bi tan	that are very big
Nibe lale ri oyin atafara re	is where we find honey bees and the honeycombs

Also, there is mythological belief about honey bees and creation. The Ifa chant below explains the relationship during the prehistoric times of the coexistence of humans and the honey bees. Humans do visit honey bees and they danced together, play drums together until humans felt superior and then started to destroy the nature. This action brought with it disasters, a pandemic and catastrophic occurrences. See the excerpt in [Table 2](#).

This chant expresses some fundamental issues connecting humans co-habiting with nonhumans, it explains the human–honey bee cordial relationship in creation which brought sound health and peace to the world. But as humans started plundering the nature and displacing habitats like the honey bee's, the earth started suffering different forms of global destruction which by extended interpretations could extend to the cyclones, tsunamis, floods, and the COVID-19 pandemic being punishment for humans' antagonistic efforts against nature. The chant expresses the myth about creation and then humans and non-humans descended from heaven. Human race was afraid of pandemics and global health issues they were asked to make sacrifices and respect non-human and their habitats. Humans were all free and they dance at the home of three different species of honey bees, played music and enjoyed the company of honey bees. The chant concludes that no one ever put honey in the mouth and frown because of its sweetness.

**In Tanure Ojaide's** (1996) poetry *Poetic Imagination in Black Africa: Essays on African Poetry*, the target is the reconstruction of his Urhobo world and culture where oil exploitation has destroyed both the community and its forest including the honey bees. Ojaide's poetry explains his desire for the exploiters and what their lives should be. He desires that the honey bees displaced should turn to misery bees and sting them well.

The scorpions bitterest venom confuses them,  
The sturdiest cobra spit into his peering eyes,  
The bees make thorough grimace of them

The poem explains the different categories of self-defending insects like the honey bee and ants that occupy the forests. In the poem *The Fate of Vultures and other Poems*, Ojaide (1991) compared the politicians that collaborate with oil exploitation industries explore the oil which further

displaced honey bee in the Niger Delta. The poem says these politicians are chiefs of selfish rules. The rules they investigated is how oil will be exploited not how habitat would be able to coexist in the region, the swarm of mystery bees mythologically believed to be evil and dangerous and could be invoked to kill people. The results of displacing the Niger Delta bee makes the poet to compare them to mystery bees. See the texts below:

chiefs of selfish rule  
they are a swarm of mystery bee  
haunting robbers of the proud heritage...listen to my song  
the music of communal pain (2)

In the poem *Song from the honey bee*, Idem Emmanuel Etop (2017) below he narrates the place and space of honey bee before the advent of oil exploitation. The poem rightly represents the sounds and the production of sweetness and that the presence of honey bee "is the beauty of morning". However, the displacement of the bee in Niger Delta brings sorrow to the habitats. Humancentric oil exploitation and pollution of the honey bee habitats could not make people hear the songs and sounds of the bees. See the poem text below:

These are sonnets directly from the beehive,  
These are songs on which the soldier bees thrive,  
Fighting enemies outside and within.  
The sweetness of the honey from your comb.  
Hungering for the honey dripping from your womb.  
Your presence is the beauty of morning (1)

Nneka Egbuna is a Nigerian singer and songwriter who is making her name on the world stage. Her work combines soul, hip hop, reggae and African music, with powerful texts that send messages of resilience themes, injustice in the oil-rich Niger Delta. She won a prestigious MOBO (Music of Black Origin) Award in the UK for Best African Act. Nneka grew up in the city of Warri in the Niger Delta with a Nigerian father and German mother. She went to university in the German city of Hamburg, and it was there that her singing career took off. While Nneka is captivating audiences around the world, her songs are most rewarding – but also risky – for her because of the political content of her lyrics. Excerpt of one of her songs that directly links to displacement of habitat, oil, environmental degradation, and exploitation titled *Niger Delta* is given in [Table 3](#).

Nneka Egbuna in her song reiterates the fact of displacing the habitats such as the fish, the rivers, ocean, honey bees, the trees and others. The song emphasizes several natural resources that were destroyed. This includes the fishes in the river. The pollution made the fishes poisoned. The water in Niger Delta is also poisoned through oil spillage. The singer gave the historical analysis of the imperialist engaging with slavery first then turned to extraction and then the habitats. She says in her song "but right now, I no go take am" which means there must be resistance to preserve the habitats making connotations for a systemic protest to return honey bees in Niger Delta spaces.

**Table 2.** Excerpt from Ifa Chant.

Nigba ti won ti ikole orun bo wale aye	They were coming from heaven for a life on earth
Eru aisan ati ajakale arun	They all feared the eminence of disease
Si ba gbogbo won pata po	and infirmity on earth
Won ni ki won rubo	They were asked to make rituals
eyonu ati ipese	of appeasement and sacrifice
Ni gere ti won dele aye oo	On getting to the earth
Won bo lowo aisan ati ajakale arun	They were all free from disease and infirmity
Ijo ni won njo ninu ile oyin	As they were dancing in the home of Oyin (bee)
Won n lulu	They were drumming
Ninu ile ado	in the house of Ado (a type of bee)
Ayo se se se ninu	The home of Fuun-Fuun
ile funnfuun patapata	(another type of bee) was not less joyous
Eni ti o ba mo wipe	Who does not know that
ile oyin okoro nigba kan kan	the home of the bee is never bitter?
Eni kan i foyin senu koroju	No one puts honey
abi kosofooo	in the mouth and frowns.

Table 3. Niger Delta by Nneka Egbuna.

Dem come fish our water empty	They came to displaced habitats-fish, sea, honey bee etc
Dem come chop our oil plenty	they came to extract our oil
Come take resources away	They took all the natural resources away
Come take all our riches	Took all the wealth away
Dem come use us as dem store	They use us to enrich themselves
For raw material to make them rich	they use us as raw materials for the productions
but right now, I no go take am	But now I will not take such again

Ubrei-Joe Jeru is a graduate of linguistics and communication studies from the University of Port Harcourt. He is a multitalented artist, a poet and an environmental activist. He has recorded numerous songs as an environmental artist, tackling the issues that have ravaged the frontline communities in Niger Delta. One of the songs released by Ubrei-Joe Jeru is titled *Blacktide* in Niger Delta. *Blacktide* contained good, displayed pictures of the poor settlements of homes, poor environment showing contaminated areas affected, displaced habitat like the honey bee in the Niger Delta region. The song was communicated to the people in a simple, direct style. See the song texts in Table 4.

The song *Blacktide* expresses the pains and agonising condition of the Niger Delta habitats displaced because of oil production. The honey bee has been severely impacted among other habitats. As narrated above exploration of oil started around 1955 and till date crude oil has still been exploited which continually destroys honey bee colonies and farming. Oil explorations affects the fishes, the land and soil for agriculture. Agriculture in terms of vegetable production would enable the presence of honey bees and the pollination of flowers and advancement of bee habitat in the environment. The song helps us to witness the suffering of community members.

Beyond the song texts the sounds from the songs and poems are very much critical because they explain some emotions and expressions of community people. Sounds in music could be represented pictorially and symbolically. The songs, chants and poems discussed are very much attached to the people and the environmental plights. These songs are melodic, harmonies, rhymes and rhythms which are culturally situated and communally enjoyed. Simple melodies and harmonies are generally a community way of showing happiness and frustrations such as themes of oil and the environmental issues.

*Beyond Texts, Sounding Places and Spaces of Honey Bee Music*

In this section, I examined music and sound about the honey bee and its place among the Niger Delta people of Nigeria. Music on honey bees occupies a dynamic space because it emphasizes the current global debate on the sustainability of the environment and the honey bee from the indigenous knowledge like the selected music. It therefore serves as a reference for other parts of the world where music especially the sounds are not yet taken as serious in tackling the issues of apocalyptic and endangerment of habitats like the honey bees, climate change and environmental degradation.

The concept of place and space as phenomenal academic debate cannot be overemphasized. *Oxford English Dictionary* explains that place refers not only to a specific geographical notion of social class and distinction. Grimley (2018) notes that to call a place a home is to evoke ideas of ownership and belonging, to be “out of place” can suggest a simple anomaly, or a more existential sense of alienation and exile. Place is powerfully both a physical category and one that is also culturally imagined and produced.

Narrating Delius’s composition and his sense of place, Grimley (2018) notes that place can equally indicate subject position, it determines how we listen to Delius’s music and where (and when). This is applicable to songs about Niger

Delta region’s cultural spaces such as fresh water, the ocean, trees, the fishes, the agricultural products, the bird, insects including honey bees and their importance as cultural signifiers. As Von Glahn (2003) queried what do musical commemorations of place tell us? This calls our attention to the place of sounding cultural and natural spaces and the ecomusicological ideal.

The selected music like Niyi Adedokun,<sup>1</sup> Akin Ogundokun<sup>2</sup> Inneka Egbuna,<sup>3</sup> and Ubrei-Joe Jeru<sup>4</sup> invokes the interrelationship of sounds and the environment and nature connections in the contemporary discourse. There are variations in the range of the melodies because of the notes used. These honey bee’s song melodies are examined based on the phrases, contours, and intervals.

Ecomusicology as a theory that drives this paper explains the sounding scape of nature and the honey bee narratives in the selected music and poems. From the selected song texts and sound used in this paper, the musical elements such as melodic movements, harmonic structures, key centres, rhythms, and the musical forms mostly call, and response explains the landscaping of the cultural scape at the trajectories of honey bee displacement and environmental degradation.

Musical representation of the horror of killing the honey bee could be heard. This is done through a pathetic wailing and musical instruments representing the catastrophic space and landscape the honey bee and the common people are placed. The sounds in the music show the agony, pains, and untold suffering that both human and non-human nature passed and are still going through in Niger Delta of Nigeria. This is what Nixon terms slow violence and environmentalism of the poor.

Table 4. *Blacktide* by Ubrei-Joe Jeru.

For the very long long-time	for so long the community
Our people are suffering	people have been suffering
For a long time	for so long now
our people are waiting	people are waiting
so many things been happening	So many things have happened (honey bee displaced)
So many years gone by	So many years gone bye
From buglers to explosion	from bugler to oil explosion
Food poison in the nation	food poisoning in the nation
What is the conclusion	What is the conclusion?
Is there no solution	Is there no solution?
Stop drilling oil wells	Stop drilling oil wells

The soundspaces in the music are laden with emotions of catastrophic environmental degradations. The pieces are those shared cultural and environmental realizations and epistemology of human's space in place. Basically, the sounding caution, education, limitation, and the need to interact with nature and other human entities are embedded in the sound's studies in this article. The cultural scape gives day to day lived experiences and expectations that reinforce the realization of the needed global interrelationship and harmonic bonding. Also, noted is the honey bee scape as inscription of human traits. Whenever humans transgress and hurt the nature through extraction the nature is bound to resist and rebound with phenomenal catastrophe which the world currently experiences in form of fire, flood, drought, and other climatic anthropogenic elements.

## Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated the linkage of music and poetry as they relate to the environmental degradation and displacement of honey bees in Niger Delta of Nigeria. I have shown human actions and their resultant effects have affected the environment, the Niger Delta people, the inhabitants. This also resonates the effects of oil on honey bee globally. Ecomusicology as a theoretical framework rightly explains the connections and interdependence of humans, environment, and culture and the need to mutually respect the relationship for mutual benefits. The interlayers and honey bees' spaces compared to multinationals and extractive companies explain the urgent global action against dependence on oil to reduce global warming perpetrated by the multinationals is very apt. Nigerian popular music and poems are therefore well suited in making global advocacy which could reach a global phenomenon if such other songs could be engaged in other parts of the globe. Popular music therefore speaks to global environmental sustainability. Musical spaces and sounds spaces such as the melodic movements, tonal centre, and other musical forms that reflect the community's musical engagements could therefore resonate discourses on the environment and provide logical and relevant solutions to the oil exploration

and honey bee degradation issues especially when it is based on community solution for a clean land, forested areas and the honey bees that pollinate them instead of a top-down approach.

## Notes

1. Oyin So Adun Nu - YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MEzuSlcoHBs>
2. Audio from Stir Media - Google Drive: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1MV2PmukU7U-YKiXdPkX8cX-Y9TCjAsDy/view?usp=drivesdk>
3. Niger Delta - YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zj9oYCYDtjI>
4. BlackTide in Niger Delta - EnviroNews Nigeria - YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z3QEEwBvp7Q>

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