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**Egbesu Deity in Niger Delta Conflict:  
A Critical Review of Ekanpou Enewaridideke's Spiked beyond Spikes**

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**Abstract**

The oil-rich Niger Delta region of Nigeria has remained underdeveloped and pauperized in spite of the immense oil wealth derived from exploration of its natural resources. It is no wonder that Niger Delta youths form militant groups to protect their local environment. These militias resort to the supernatural to harmonize their limited military power to the superior arsenals of their adversaries who are the ruling powers of the Nigerian state. Ijaw militias in particular, invoke the mystic power of *Egbesu* deity of war and justice for protection, invisibility and immunity in confronting state machineries. This paper examines the portrayal of *Egbesu* in recent Niger Delta literature. *Egbesu* is employed as a mystical inspiration in Ekanpou Enewaridideke's *Spiked beyond Spikes* in the struggle against the combine forces of the Nigerian government, oil companies and internal exploiters to combat environmental depletion, political discrimination and the Niger Delta politics. While employing the Eco-Marxist ideology which integrates the Marxian trust of opposition to capitalism in environmental issues, the paper situates the *Egbesu* deity as a supernatural force that empowers and fortifies the Ijaws in warfare. It concludes by noting that in oil conflict, Enewaridideke, projects a return to the gods as a spiritual instrument of resistance in order to tackle the seemingly never-ending predicament of the Niger Delta people.

**Keywords:**

Niger Delta, Ijaw youth, Ekanpou Enewaridideke, Eco-Marxism, Egbesu,

**Introduction**

The belief in supernatural forces is strong in Africa even though many profess to belong to the Christian or Muslim faith. Among the Ijaw people of the Niger Delta as in many African cultures, there is still a strong commitment to ancestor worship. The water spirit, Owuamapu and Egbesu for instance, are prominent in the Ijaw pantheon. Egbesu is recognized in Ijaw tradition as the god of war and justice. The deity is believed to offer divine defense from attacks of the enemy weapons. Omeje (2005), acknowledges this when he affirms that

“Outmatched by the military power of their adversaries, these Ijaw groups re-invent and tap into the spiritual power of the ancient Egbesu deity in their homeland, a magical device that complements their limited firepower” (pp.81-82). The summons of Egbesu in contemporary Niger Delta literature indicates the peoples’ desire to go back to their cultural roots as a means of invoking a more superior power in the tussle between them and the Nigerian government because “it is widely held that Egbesu offers magical protection against gunfire to these young militias” (Omeje, 2005: p.82).

Without doubt, the dominant forces of Nigeria’s military have made the youth militia groups specifically, of the Ijaw origin to dig into their spiritual past. The militias who are intimidated by the strength of their superior’s recourse to invoking the mystical forces for empowerment. It is important to recognize that magic and the occult have always been seen as effective tools of war and conflict by different ethnic cultures of traditional Africa. Oral tradition is filled with tales of fighting men fortifying themselves and sharpening their tools in readiness for war. Such occult rituals give psychological drive and confidence to the fighters. Austin Obinna Ezejiolor (2016: p.27) provides a review of some armed groups who invoke spiritual and mystical powers for defense as they proceed into war. African magic guerillas in Northern Uganda, Bakassi boys of Nigeria, the Acholi tribe of Uganda among others believe that the fate of their warriors in wars ultimately rests with the gods or other mystical forces. In the same way, the Ijaws trust that Egbesu orders them to embark on war with a promise to protect the fighters as long as they stick to its ethics of war and justice. In this case, Egbesu is summoned and invoked in conflicts with foreign oil companies and the Nigerian government as a deity of justice and fairness, in protecting their soil that is now being polluted through oil exploration and exploitation.

### **Background to Oil Conflict in the Niger Delta**

The Niger Delta region, located in the Southern part of Nigeria undeniably generates more income than any other region in the nation due to its huge reserve of crude oil. Oil extraction has impacted disastrously on the environment of Niger Delta communities, threatening the subsistent peasant economy, ecosystem, abode of their gods and by extension, their entire livelihood and economic survival. Enajite Ojaruega (2022) lists some of these existential threats to include: “depletion of biodiversity, coastal and riverbank erosion, oil spillage, soil fertility loss, deforestation, gas flares, and the improper disposal of industrial wastes from the oil industry, especially the local oil refineries are some of the fallouts” (p.15). The oil producing communities have basically remained underdeveloped, marginalized and psychologically alienated while the wealth derived from oil resources and exports revenue is

largely used to develop other places as well as to benefit the operators of the oil industry and the bureaucrats in government (Ojaruega, 2022: p.16).

Poverty and unemployment have led to a spate of resistance and attacks on the facilities and personnel of these oil companies operating in the region. Parts of their actions include attacks on the oil companies, oil pipelines and workers. The government would send in the troops to massacre hundreds and destroy their homes in response to these agitations rather than seeking a peaceful resolution. The Odi massacre of 20 November, 1999 in Bayelsa State for instance, was an act of vengeance by the Olusegun Obasanjo government on men, Women and children following the killing of 12 policemen by youth militias in the area. State oppression and violence increased following the destruction of Odi and nearby communities. The Niger Delta militias are not only struggling against the federal government, but also fighting with the multinational oil companies as well as some leaders in the Niger Delta region who work along with the Federal Government and the oil industry to enslave their people. All of these create threat to the natives, their environment, as well as development of the region.

Oil conflict began with the Isaac Adaka Boro revolution in the mid-1960s, after the discovery of oil in commercial quantity in Oloibiri, Rivers State. According to Edlyne Anugwom (2011) "It was Isaac AdakaBoro who, with a rag-tag army of fellow Ijaw youths under the umbrella of the Niger Delta Volunteer Force (NDVF), declared the Republic of the Niger Delta and raised a flag to that effect on 23 February, 1966" (p.7). Boro's revolution was subsequently crushed by the superior forces of the federal government after a gallant 12-day fight. The Niger Delta conflict also gathered momentum through the peaceful activism of late Ken Saro-Wiwa who was at the forefront of the formation of the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP) and the Ogoni Bill of Rights presented to the federal government of Nigeria in 1990. Saro-Wiwa's execution by the Abacha junta in 1995 turned peaceful protest in the region into a violent struggle between Niger Delta youth militias and the federal government forces. The emergence of tough militia leaders such as Asari-Dokubo, TomPolo, Ateke Tom, BoyLoaf, and so on, under different acronyms namely: (NDPVF), (NDV), (EBA) and others champion the confrontation with the ruling powers for control of the resources.

The Niger Delta problem has also received literary responses from within and outside sources. Niyi Osundare, Tanure Ojaide, Kaine Agary, Peter Omoko, Nnimmo Bassey, Gabriel Okara, Ebi Yeibo, Stephen Kekeghe amongst a host of others have been writing on the inevitable extinction of the region through destruction of the flora and fauna. Tanure Ojaide for instance, mobilizes the poetics of poetry in his rejection of the deadly environmental impact of oil exploitation and exploration in the Niger Delta area of Nigeria. To achieve the above aim, his poetry collection *The Tale of the Harmattan*, written within the

theoretical framework of eco-criticism becomes like a voice in the wilderness decrying the marginalization and maltreatment of the people. This reality is also revealed in Ekanpou Enewaridideke's *Spiked beyond Spikes*.

This paper pays particular attention to the invocation and interventions of mystic powers in the affairs of the people and environment. Enewaridideke writes from the Niger Delta with Egbesu at the forefront of Eco-Marxist revolution to reflect the plight of this region. It is in the above contest that Enewaridideke preoccupies himself with the belief in the god of justice and warfare understood to combat evil. The Ijaw fighters look upon the deity for spiritual fortification. Accordingly, Courson and Odijie (2020) state that “Egbesu as a ‘just war’ philosophy, establishes a reward system through the promise of victory for just warriors” (p.3). Consequently, victory is assured in view of the fact that the deity provides supernatural energy and defense against adversary weaponry and also blesses Ijaw armed forces with triumph against their enemies. Enewaridideke, who hails from the Nigeria Delta delivers an insightful analysis of the issues the area is grappling with while offering fresh perspectives regarding how things can be different for the young generations.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Several theoretical frameworks such as Postcolonial theory and ecocriticism have been used to analyze the thematic concerns in Niger Delta. While ecocritics contend that literature may inspire environmentally conscious behaviours, postcolonial theorists argue that literature can challenge colonial legacies and create social transformation, according to (Davis, 2023: p.181). Eco-Marxism, in the words of David Pepper (1993), is a “sociopolitical ideology that fuses the Marxist critique of capitalism with ecological issues and pro-environmental movements” (p.23). Karl Marx ideas for society serve as a framework for Eco-Marxism. It promotes a revolution in favour of the proletariat. Marxist ideology proponents hold that a normal capitalist society is divided between the rich and the poor, the employers and the employees, and that those with wealth and power take advantage of the poor and oppress them. James O'Connor first introduced and established Eco-Marxism as a modern theory in his 1988 article where he examined the inconsistencies in capitalist systems while addressing ecological challenges. Environmental harm and the widening gap between those who hold the means of production and those who do not are issues that Eco-Marxists to address. To safeguard the environment and those who suffer abuse under capitalism, eco-Marxists maintain that the current structure requires complete restructuring through resistance campaigns, or what Reitz cited in (Muhia 2020:6), refers to as "ecological activism," which aim to unite the populace in opposition to capitalism's exploitation of the natural world. From this context, Enewaridideke's *Spiked beyond Spikes* is examined from an Eco-Marxist perspective, emphasising the negative effects of capitalism on both the environment and

human well-being. The text exposes how the capitalist system uses violence to subdue both nature and people. Eco Marxism seems the most appropriate critical theory for this paper given the fact that eco-marxist advocate a number of steps to overturn ecological destruction and to establish a harmonious society in which humans live peacefully alongside nature.

### **The Egbesu Deity**

Egbesu is a religious component of Ijaw tradition that functions either as an Ijaw social movement or as an Ijaw god of war and justice. Young Ijaws are traditionally initiated into Egbesu cult as a rite of passage into adulthood. Egbesu is also worshipped as a deity with shrines and priests in different Ijaw communities. Worshipers summon the deity for spiritual protection and invoke Egbesu spirit in wars putting on three different colours – typically white, red, and black – around their arms, as wrappers, or as hood. Oil extraction in most Ijaw communities often lead to conflicts with the explorers and their sponsors for which the locals invoke Egbesu power to immunize their armed forces against enemy bullets. According to Ezejiofor (2016), “among the Ijaws, the deity is believed to have the capability to not only direct them to fight a war against their perceived enemies, but also to specify the exact conditions and terms on which they must execute the directive. Besides, Egbesu gives them power, protect them, take them to war and bring them back” (p.29). There are also claims that worshippers of Egbesu generally, swear allegiance to the deity, and go through certain rituals that strengthen them against bullets and assure them of victory. This is evident in the case of Timi Kaiser-Wilhelm Ogoriba (alias T.K. Ogoriba). Ogoriba is popular among his people for mobilizing youths in peaceful demonstration against the government for which he was eventually arrested and jailed. The Ijaw people were able to put the efficacy of Egbesu to action as youths from all the communities gathered first, in Kaiama and then in Oloibiri, to take actions toward the release of Ogoriba. Their war weapons were their white cloths taken from the Egbesu shrine at Amagbulu. The chief priest instructed four men to advance to Kaiama T-junction and strip the policemen at work of their firearms. In addition, four young male virgins carried the Egbesu tool of direction called *Obobo* in Ijaw. Egbesu selected those to go on to Bayelsa State to free Ogoriba. The youths triumphed over the armed security men, stripped them of their weapons, and proceeded to Government house to release Ogoriba. This victory verifies the efficacy of Egbesu powers as well as confirms that their course was that of justice. Enewaridideke has simply recreated this aspect of Ijaw culture through which they admit to assistance and interventions from the mystic and supernatural. By this description of Egbesu, Enewaridideke’s text under study shall be examined accordingly.

### **Empirical Review**

*Spiked beyond Spikes* is a relatively new publication coming from the Niger Delta region in Nigeria and may not have attracted many critical reviews. Damian Opata's (2018) review of the text suggests that "the novel is an affirmation that true liberation is best achieved through an ideological return to the roots, with its pains and attendant sacrifice" (np). Enewaridideke calls upon his people to stand and fight for their right especially, with the help of their deity Egbesu. Enewaridideke himself says during the book launch in 2018 that;

I do not want things to degenerate to that level because when a river is blocked, the affected people will look for freedom, liberation. They will fight for a solution; they would want to see that blockage is removed, and in the cause of trying to remove that blockage, the people are likely to opt for independence; they are likely to opt for freedom. And when you opt for freedom what happens? You are likely to be at war with a particular country where you find yourself. And that becomes a kind of clash of two forces and it will lead to loss of lives.

### **Textual Analysis**

Ekanpou Enewaridideke, is an acclaimed journalist, freelance writer, poet, playwright, novelist of Niger Delta descent. He attended Ayakoromo grammar school Ayakoromo, after which he proceeded to Delta State University, Abraka and the prestigious University of Nigeria, Nsukka. Enewaridideke has many works to his name. *Spiked beyond Spikes* (2018) his second creative work written in English flavoured with Ijaw dialect, highlights the plight of his people, blessed so well with natural resources for which they are spiked, tortured and punished by those in power and the fight for environmental justice. It is the story of resistance to marginalization, oppression, tyranny and near annihilation of a people by their fellow countrymen. Enewaridideke's fiction, similar to Tanure Ojaide's *The Activist* (2006), calls for a radical reform in order to improve the lot of his people.

President Waibode is an Ekissa man from the northern part of Oporoza, while the erstwhile President Seride, of the People's Progressive Party is a Tobu man from the southern part of Oporoza. During his regime, Seride developed the abandoned Niger Delta region of Oporoza. The Northern Oporozans felt resentful and wanted Weibode to become the president. When Weibode comes into power, he succeeds in erasing the gains the Tobus made under Seride, by removing all the Tobus from prominent position in government, paint them as corrupt leaders and replace them with northerners from his own village. He

maintains that the likes of “Professor Tortorke, Okoloba and Alabeni (all Tobus) must have been tainted by the virus corruption, (as such, cannot be part of) a government of change envision to stamp out corruption” (p.27). President Waibode clamps Endorobou into prison, declares Alabeni, the people’s hero, a wanted man, has little or no respect for the ministers working with him, displays immense ignorance on the working of the economy, and is intolerant of suggestions that do not agree with many of his uninformed opinions. On a general note, the citizens of Oporoza are subjected to untold hardship as inflation, joblessness, insecurity, kidnapping, and mass killing of people by herdsman, and unmitigated dictatorship take centre stage.

The oppressed Tobus people show their resolve to resist president Waibode and break away in the wake of the news that “President Waibode has a grand plot to beggar (them) southern Oporozans into retirement from this earth” (p.160). Alabeni, most likely a forerunner and reincarnation of Isaac Adaka Boro, embarks on a mission in Oporoza to liberate his people, the Tobus, from the tyranny of a new dictatorship: “There comes a time in the life of a man when major decisions are made. When there is a seamless stream of plot to beggar you into retirement from planet earth, taking major decisions becomes righteously unavoidable” (p.161).

South Oporoza is subjected to an all-out war order from the Federal Government of Oporoza led by Weibode. The Tobus return to their roots, seeking the help of the dreaded Egbesu deity. The bombs that were sent to the south were not detonated due to the strong backing of the Egbesu. The warships were sunk and the southern Oporozans were not killed. Soldiers of the south did not need to fight; they sang war songs and danced around Akpere to conquer their enemies. Upon hearing of his defeat, Weibode dies of heart attack. Tebekone quickly replaces him as the president, accepted defeat and surrendered.

The victory of Alabeni earned him praise names such as “born activist”, “the unbeatable hero of our manumission’s struggle” (p.173). Alabeni is very popular with his people. This popularity stems from his sense of devotion and generosity towards them. With the government of President Weibode, his people became hopeless and powerless. Shocked by the neglect everywhere in Akpare, Alabeni singlehandedly takes care of the villagers. To the people of Akpare, Alabeni was their only god; they knew no God other than Alabeni (p.83). Old men, women and youths were registered and placed on a monthly salary by him. He also built and equipped their hospitals with free medical services to all the communities in southern Oporoza. He refurbished the “dilapidated secondary and primary school buildings” in Akpare community (p.83). Alabeni gives “additional training” to science teachers, paid them inducement, and offered scholarships to “exceptionally brilliant students” (84). He also “built a massive Driving Institute in Zeneama”, his “grandfather’s village” (p.85) It does



appear that destiny had prepared Alabeni for the success he achieves in the struggle for the liberation of his people.

Endorobou, a Tobu man himself, uses every opportunity that comes his way to catalogue the injustices unleashed on his people by president Waibode. These unfairnesses are frighteningly many and include the following: the scrapping of the Maritime Surveillance Commission headed by Alabeni, the scrapping of Creek Development Commission, the scrapping of the Maritime University, Akpare, the scrapping of the Law School, and the stoppage of the North-South Road, all of which were being pursued by the immediate past administration of president Seride. Endorobou has selectively made use of historical and factual data from the vanguard newspaper to chronicle the injustices of government to the Niger Delta people in particular, and to the people of southern Oporoza in general.

Weibode claims that Tobus are corrupt and that to make the country clean, every form of corrupt practices or leaders must be dealt with. This becomes a ploy to take out and oppress Alabeni and Weriowei, the Governor of Toru - Ebe state who opposes him and his (the president) wife for corruption: "Tebedita, the wife of president Weibode, is said to have involved in a money laundering case of five trillion US dollars in America. To Weriowei, if president Weibode was sincere in his corruption war, he should first move against his wife who has been convicted in America over a case of money laundering" (p.46).

This challenge leads to the imprisonment of governor Weriowei. The president disobeys the rule of law, ignoring the immunity that covers a serving governor and throws him into prison. Decrying the havoc done to the serving governor, the president of Oporoza Barristers Association, Barrister Olotebe writes: "The constitution is clear on the immunity of every serving governor. The arrest of Weriowei is the most despicable form of intimidation. It shows that the government of president Waibode is a very lawless one" (p.90).

Mr president feigned ignorance when it was reported to him that "Two hundred indigenes of Gboroama had been killed at night. Gboroama is an agrarian village in Southern Oporoza. In the night when the village is asleep, the Ekisa herdsmen came and slaughtered two hundred people. Could this be a calculated attempt to wipe the Tobus out of history so they (Northerners) could claim complete ownership of the natural resources? The Ozidi Boys continue to destroy the flow stations and this alarms the president. He decides to take action against the Tobus, detaining fifteen boys of Akpare grammar school, branding them Ozidi Boys. This coincides with the Operation Lion Gore where they branded the fifteen young boys as militants and took them away.

President Waibode's hypocrisy is exposed as the narrator reveals that all his new appointees are family members from Ekisa:

Take a look at all his political appointments. They stink on nepotism and favoritism. The chairman of corruption elimination commission, creek development commission, maritime surveillance commission and national electoral commission are all his relatives from his village Kasikiri. What about the inspector General of police and the security Adviser? They are his second cousin from the same Kasikiri. Where is the president paraded integrity when government is turned into a family business of incompetent hands? (p.162)

Shortly before the people of southern Oporozan decide to breakaway and make a country for themselves, Alabeni seeks a peaceful means of resolving the conflict between the government and the people. He wrote an open letter to the president in the Tempest newspaper where he states: "I will not have to recourse to violence or war on account of baseless allegation of fraud against me...I shall come out to face justice the moment due process is followed" (p.119). Lack of response from the federal government results in the declaration of an independent Oporoza. This becomes inevitable as Alabeni, the leader of the Southern Oporozans leads a revolution, declares a new nation called Southern Oporoza:

...People in the southern Oporoza are no longer safe. The lives of the Tobus have been reduced to the status of a fly subject to man's whimsical annihilation. Because our lives are no longer safe in this country, we thereby declare unequivocally that we are no longer part of this country called Oporoza. We have decided to eke out a living under the roof of our new country called South Oporoza. Henceforth, we shall have no dealing with the northern axis of Oporoza. South Oporoza has become an independent country.... Southern Oporoza would now be under the leadership of Southern Oporoza Manumission Movement (SOPMAM) (p.163).

With the above declaration, the president and the northern Oporozan would become angry. Who would feed them again? From where will he the President, have wealth to feed his family. He decides to use his military might to fight against Alabeni and the southern Oporozans. SOPMAM, under the fierce leadership of Alabeni had become battle set against the oppressive leader who believed so much in his military force. He combines the physical military might with the spiritual fortification of Egbesu, Tobus god of war and justice. Alabeni had thoroughly prearranged and equipped himself for the fight, taking a painful oath

at the Egbesu shrine in order to accomplish his goal. With the pot and the sacred unspoken oath, he is sure to succeed. Eventually, he makes the decision to lead the change. This is evident in the event of the press conference held in Akpare when he (Alabeni) was asked how ready he was for the battle ahead and if he has the military might to withstand the north. He replies: “I have a mass of invisible weapons to withstand any confrontation. My invisible weapons are weapons from the grove of Egbesu. Egbesu is the supplier of my weapon – my invisible weapons” (p.166). Alabeni’s preparation was a painful sacrifice for him and his family. He swore before Egbesu to abandon his family and resist telling anybody why. The Chief priest ordered him:

take this onguo of Egbesu’s sacred water; it is from me the Chief Priest of Egbesu. This pot is usually given to pure intentioned voyagers as their dedicated supportive angel. My son, put this pot of water into any positive use of your choice but you must always keep the sacred unspoken oath whispered into your left ear. Egbesu sees your heart and the voyage ahead of it. No words are needed from you. Leave the shrine now!’ (pp.17-18).

President Waibode’s armed forces could not wipe out the southern Oporozans. Any time the military helicopter vomited bombs upon Akpere, the chant from Egbesu was the only neutralizer for aerial bombardment which was always expected. None of the bombs vomited detonated. Alabeni’s soldiers did not have to fight, they broke into two groups, singing Egbesu war song and danced around Akpare. On the third day, Alabeni wore the white cloths of Egbesu, and walked across Akpare three times, holding a white flag in his right hand, silently talking to himself. After this ritual, he ordered the SOPMAM soldiers to fight back. The soldiers “gunned down five military helicopters of the enemy” (p.169). All the twenty warships had been sunk by the Southern Oporozans. The dead bodies of the Northern Oporozans are littered everywhere while no casualty was recorded in the south. Egbesu never disappoints nor abandons them and in the end they came out victorious. The narrative ends with the lower class triumphing over the ruling class, as is true of many Marxist writings.

The word, “spike” and its past form “spiked” interchangeably used six times in the text, explains the complex social, political, and environmental difficulties in the Niger Delta. Its underlying meaning is given credibility by the narrator who describes the people of Southern Oporoza after the war: “For a people so malevolently spiked, bombed, chastised, humiliated, over their God-given resources, Alabeni was content that they had built the right personality, the right image insensible to the perpetually poisoned spikes of the Ekikas-spikes now deadened beyond triumphalism-consolidated resurrection” (p.212). The Tobus people of southern Oporoza experience repression and hardship. Despite being a part of Oporoza’s

regime, they are deprived and abandoned under tyrant Weibode.

In this masterpiece, Eco Marxist activist Enewaridideke provides a powerful critique on the capitalist activities of the oil firms and the continuous neglect by the Nigerian government. He plainly tells his people that they can oppose any oppressive corrupt regime if they agree. For readers of Niger Delta literature, Enewaridideke does indeed present the tale from a fresh angle, suggesting that the revolution needed would go way beyond the physical. Opata (2018) supports this claim that the African traditional system would go a long way in restoring the freedom so longed for in the Niger Delta region.

### **Conclusion**

This paper argues that the involvement of the supernatural and the invocation Egbesu in Niger Delta literature has added to the call for liberation through mystic intervention. However, *spiked beyond Spikes* seems to satirize the Nigerian government, especially, president Buhari's led administration. The vivid description of president Waibode and the events and controversies surrounding him makes it clear that the writer laments the condition of the Ijaw people under president Buhari's administration, and creatively suggests a mystic revolution from the Niger Delta region. He tells the people that when they agree, they can stand up to any form of marginalization. Enewaridideke indeed, creates a new perspective to the reading of Niger Delta literature.

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