



# The Sociology of Oil Bunkering and the Role of Religious Leaders in the Niger Delta, Nigeria

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**Abstract:** This study examines oil bunkering in the Niger Delta and investigates the potential role of religious leaders in mitigating its environmental impacts in Nigeria. Oil spills from multinational oil companies have generated enormous negative impacts on the environment and vulnerable communities in the Niger Delta region. Most existing literature on climate change in the Niger Delta focuses predominantly on the activities of multinational oil companies, particularly regarding oil spills and gas flaring practices. This study extends the scholarly discourse by examining the negative impacts of illegal oil bunkering on the worsening climate crisis in the Niger Delta and investigating the potential interventional role of religious leaders in mitigating these environmental challenges. Data were obtained from personal and direct observations, key informant interviews (KII), and relevant academic literature. The findings reveal that oil bunkering has polluted streams, rivers, and lakes, degraded farm lands to the point of infertility, led to the death of aquatic animals, and contributed to the rising cases of respiratory and reproductive health problems in the Niger Delta. Religious leaders can influence public perception and discourage oil bunkering by preaching against such illegal activities and highlighting their environmental and societal harm. Additionally, religious leaders should organise workshops and seminars to educate communities about the long-term consequences of oil bunkering, thereby promoting a culture of environmental responsibility and stewardship.

**Keywords:** Climate change, Leaders, Niger Delta, Religion, The vulnerable

## 1. Introduction

Oil bunkering and *kpo-fire* activities represent persistent environmental challenges in the Niger Delta region, resulting in oil leaks, spills, and various hazardous threats to human lives and community property. The environmental degradation reached a critical point in 1995 when prominent environmental activists, including Ken Saro-Wiwa, Saturday Dobee, Nordu Eawo, Daniel Gbooko, Paul Levera, Felix Nuate, Baribor Bera, Barinem Kiobel, and John Kpuine, collectively advocated for environmental protection. The multinational oil companies, such as SHELL, AGIP, TOTAL, MOBILE, among others, did not care about the welfare of the people; instead, both the companies and the Nigerian government were more interested in the money realizable from petrol sales. General Sani Abacha sentenced nine major environmental activists of the Niger Delta to death on November 10, 1995. This gave oil companies more legal support

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to continue with the devastation of the environment in the Niger Delta. The major contention of the nine environmental activists was to ensure that there was fair sharing of oil wealth with the indigenes through the provision of good drinking water and the need to follow international protocol on environmental protection (Mwakideu, 2020).

Even when a civilian government came on board with governance in Nigeria in 1999, that was President Olusegun Obasanjo; he sent soldiers, the navy, and the air force to the region, not to solve the environmental crisis of oil companies but to deal with anyone challenging or hindering the activities of multinational oil companies. Thus, gas flaring and oil spillage continued, and everyone decided to make money from the situation, including the troops sent there, locals, and even the activists. These individuals in the delta began to profit from the environmental destruction, and the activists, military regimes, and well-connected Deltans discovered that by secretly vandalising pipelines, they could win lucrative contracts for the subsequent clean-up (Barnett, 2023) and still make money from the same oil spill.

The soldiers, navy, and air force, including the locals, decided to enter the bunkering and *kpo-fire* businesses. In the context of this article, bunkering refers to the illegal breaking of petroleum pipes for sale to organisations nationally and internationally. *Kpo-fire* refers to the local refining of petrol products after the breaking of pipes conveying the products to the international refining fronts. Bunkering and *kpo-fire* activities have severe climatic consequences, with women and children emerging as particularly vulnerable groups. The air is polluted due to the heat and carbon emissions from bunkering and *kpo-fire* activities, the rivers and streams have been rendered unusable, and the farmlands have lost nutrients due to oil spills and the broader climatic effects of bunkering and *kpo-fire*. Instead, the oil thieves are cashing in on skyrocketing prices, with barges and vessels in the creeks and ocean loading stolen oil from broken pipelines and also blatantly moving the stolen oil to large vessels at the receiving terminal for movement to international refineries through the high seas (Okon, 2022).

Research has extensively documented that international petroleum corporations active in Nigeria's Niger Delta region have engaged in significant gas flaring practices. The evidence shows that this gas flaring represents the primary source of greenhouse gas emissions in Nigeria, making it the primary driver of global warming and climate change effects in the country (Mark, 2020). Additional research indicates that Nigeria is responsible for a substantial portion of Africa's total greenhouse gas emissions, primarily due to unregulated emissions from petroleum operations run by international corporations in the Niger Delta area. This significant contribution positions Nigeria as a key participant in worldwide initiatives

to address and reduce climate change impacts (Afinotan, 2022). While existing scholarship emphasizes multinational oil companies and gas flaring, little attention has been paid to the climate impact of illegal oil bunkering and the assessment of the role of religious leaders. This study addresses that gap. It is important to state that there is hardly any data on the amount of carbon emissions from bunkering and kpo-fire, but there is a need to adequately explore the implications of illegal refining and transportation of petrol (Afinotan, 2022). This study examines oil bunkering in the Niger Delta and the role of religious leaders in Nigeria. First, this study provides a sketch of oil bunkering and *kpo-fires*. Second, it discusses the climate change impacts of oil bunkering and *kpo-fires*. Third, it explains the role of religious leaders in tackling oil bunkering in Nigeria.

## 2. Methods

This study adopts a qualitative case study design, which is appropriate for capturing the lived experiences and impacts of bunkering and *kpo-fire* on communities in the Niger Delta. Data were collected through oral interviews and a review of relevant academic literature.

**Table 1**

*Socio-demographic Characteristics of Participants*

N	Name (pseudonyms)	Sex	Age	State	Status
1.	Stephen	Male	56	Rivers	Native
2.	Ruth	Female	43	Rivers	Native
3.	Blessing	Female	54	Bayelsa	Native
4.	Oghenkewe	Male	27	Delta	Native
5.	Rukevwe	Female	38	Delta	Native
6.	Jude	Male	42	Imo	Native
7.	Uche	Male	57	Abia	Native
8.	Ibong	Male	46	Akwa Ibom	Native
9.	Governor	Male	49	Cross River	Native
10.	Chidera	Female	62	Cross River	Native
11.	Christian	Male	42	Bayelsa	Religious leader
12.	Gideon	Male	68	Akwa Ibom	Religious leader
13.	Bartholomew	Male	72	Rivers	Religious leader
14.	Reuben	Male	75	Rivers	Religious leader
15.	Jude	Male	82	Imo	Religious leader

*Note.* Authors' compilation.

Data were obtained from fifteen (N=15) purposively selected informants. Table 1 shows the list of informants from the states in the Niger Delta region in Nigeria. It shows that 10 participants are natives of the Niger Delta, and 5 participants are religious leaders. The interview was conducted between 2024 and 2025. These participants were recruited through a convenience (or availability) sampling technique. The participants were drawn from only the states in the Niger Delta. These are Imo, Rivers, Bayelsa, Delta,

Abia, Akwa Ibom, and Cross River states. The choice to draw informants from only the Niger Delta is because they are the victims of the oil bunkering and *kpo-fire* than any other state in Nigeria. Also, the participants live in areas that have been affected by oil bunkering and *kpo-fire*. Some of the questions that were asked to the interviewees include: i) Do you know what oil bunkering or *kpo-fire*; ii) What are the causes of youth engaging in oil bunkering and *kpo-fire*; iii) What are the effects or implications of oil bunkering and *kpo-fire*; iv) As a religious leader, what can be done to manage the challenge of oil bunkering and *kpo-fire*.

A semi-structured interview guide was adopted. The interview was conducted through a telephone conversation, recorded, and transcribed. The choice to conduct telephone interviews with these participants was driven by their inability to attend face-to-face sessions and budgetary limitations faced by the research team. However, it is important to note that this approach did not compromise data quality, as participants provided thorough responses to all interview questions.

Informed consent for participation in the study was obtained from the participants orally. All participants provided their consent to participate in the interview. Consent is always a three-part process: 1) providing information, 2) the ability to discuss/answer questions, and 3) obtaining an agreement to participate (The University of Toledo, 2020). They were told that their responses would be recorded, which they agreed provided anonymity was maintained. They were told about the study, and the anonymity of their responses was assured. All the names used as participant names in this study are pseudonyms.

The obtained data were analysed using content analysis. It helps to understand and analyze the concepts of oil bunkering or *kpo-fire*. Content analysis helps to evaluate and interpret communication across written, visual, and auditory forms. Content analysis is a systematic approach to evaluating and interpreting communication across written, visual, and auditory forms and to uncover nuanced meanings, recurring patterns, and underlying connections within textual, visual, or audio data (Sirilakshmi et al., 2024).

### **3. Oil Bunkering and *Kpo-fire* in Niger Delta Communities**

Defining these concepts is important to understanding the problem under study. First, oil bunkering could be defined as actions such as stealing petrol through breaking of transportation pipes and smuggling of oil to the international market or refining the smuggled oil locally (Mangan, 2015). On the other hand, *kpo-fire* is one of the biggest environmental challenges that people in the Niger Delta face. *Kpo-fire* can be defined as “. . . a process of burning crude oil by illegal oil operatives or thieves at isolated locations called bunkering sites or dumpsites in order to extract refined petroleum products” (Fyneface et al., 2022). The Niger Delta could be addressed as the states that are oil-producing areas in Nigeria. They include AkwaIbom, Bayelsa, Delta, Edo, Cross Rivers, and Rivers. According to Oyegun, Lawal & Ogoro (2023), the geomorphological units of the Niger Delta include the outer barrier island complexes adjoining the

Atlantic Ocean, the lower tidal floodplain, which consists of estuaries, mangroves, and creeks, and the upper freshwater riverine floodplain, within which seven ecological units are formed. The area is known for environmental crises caused by oil exploitation and exploration.

Pipelines are laid from drilling areas where they are transported to international refineries. This is because Nigeria has no functional refinery but depends on international refineries. The pipelines have wellheads. The bunkerers use sophisticated equipment to break the pipes of the oil companies and connect their own pipes and hosts to their tanks, where they are then transported to where they are illegally refined. Operators of bunkering camps often carry out their activities even during the daytime, using both manual and sophisticated mechanical equipment. Unlike the host Niger Delta communities, they appear undisturbed by the severe environmental pollution caused by their operations (Editorial Board, 2022). Although security agencies are assigned to protect the oil pipelines, the army, navy, and air force are often financially compromised to turn a blind eye to the activities of oil bunker operators. Uche attested that:

Sometimes, most security people sent to take care of oil pipelines live a flamboyant lifestyle. They are also seen driving expensive cars. These are the proceeds obtained from their collaboration with illegal bunkering operators. I heard that some of them paid heavily to be posted to the Niger Delta. (Interview 7)

When the products are synthesized from oil pipes, they are locally refined. This locally refined form of petrol is known as a *kpo-fire* in the Niger Delta vernacular. The *kpo-fire* involves the heating of petrol to aid fractional distillation, resulting in fuel, gas, kerosene, and engine oil, among others. The environment and life are at risk during this process. Most oil pipelines pass through communities with a lot of poverty, and they see this as an opportunity. Udoma (2022) states that the Shell Petroleum Development Company loses 40 percent of the crude oil produced from onshore and shallow water fields to illegal crude oil and artisanal refining activities.

There are various accusations and counteraccusations. These foreign oil companies operating in the Niger Delta, whose pipelines have been tapped between the fields of production and their export terminals, have been accused of getting involved in oil bunkering and *kpo-fire*. According to Daniel, they connect with the bunkerers by keeping silent while the proceeds from the sale of the illegally shipped diesel are sold in the international market (Daniel, 2022). Some of the arrests recorded show that oil bunkering and *kpo-fire* have become a conventional and collaborative framework in the region. On May 2, 2022, the military arrested 12 suspects, three wooden boats, and one speed boat laden with illegally refined petrol, and also on May 3, 2022, security raided Tongolonsoju and Sokko communities because there were reports of illegal *kpo-fire* (refining camps) situations with activities coordinated and protected by high individuals in society (Oditia, 2022). Official reports indicate that during a one-year period from January 2022 to January 2023, law enforcement actions resulted in the detention of 546 individuals suspected of illegal activities. Of these cases, 429 people faced legal proceedings while 51 received convictions. Authorities

also dismantled 71 unauthorized refining operations and 22 illegal oil theft locations, seized 134 vehicles and 36 watercraft, and confiscated various other equipment linked to unlawful oil bunkering operations (Olugbode, 2023).

#### 4. Cause of Oil Bunkering and *Kpo-fire* in Niger Delta Communities

There are several reasons that have been given for the increasing spate of oil bunkering and *kpo-fire* activities in the Niger Delta.

##### Socioeconomic Causes

The quest for quick wealth has led many youths to engage in bunkering and *kpo-fire*. These youth of the Niger Delta have seen how their leaders live fat and flamboyant lifestyles with revenue from the oil-rich region. They are also seeing Nigerian politicians building houses and hotels outside Nigeria with the revenue obtained from petrol sales. They feel that they have been relatively deprived of their resources. Thus, the youth want to emulate them. They decide to break pipes and engage in illegal refining of petroleum. In the words of the governor:

Most boys who are in oil bunkering live better lives. They have the money to marry. They have money to care for their family members. Some of them do not have the patience to wait further for government jobs when they have this job staring them in the face. (Interview 9)

When they started the bunkering of pipelines, they saw the amount of money they had made and decided to continue their actions. For the youth, bunkering is the sure way to reduce relative deprivation. Many other youths have also been lured into joining the bunkering camps. Parents also seem to have approved of this because the number of youths joining bunkering camps is increasing.

##### Institutional Causes

Furthermore, security agencies are part of the cause of oil bunkering and *kpo-fire* in the Niger Delta. Some security agencies are usually sent to the Niger Delta to protect the oil installations there. Instead of doing their job of ensuring that they mitigate bunkering and *kpo-fire*, they joined the bandwagon of oil criminals.

Apart from soldiers Ibong stated that:

The police, top management staff of multinational oil companies, the navy, and some top government staff were involved in the bunkering business. In addition, local government chairpersons and counsellors are also involved in this process. (Interview 8)

Furthermore, anger against the activities of multinational oil companies made the youth engage in bunkering and *kpo-fire*. Companies, such as Shell, Agip, Mobile, and Texaco, are involved in the destruction of the environment in the Niger Delta. The people of the region felt that they were getting nothing from the activities of the oil companies. In addition, the people of the region have called the attention of the government several times, but the Nigerian government seems to be more interested in oil revenue than in the health of the people of the region and in the vulnerability of women and children. The best they felt they could do for themselves was join this illegal syphoning of oil through bunkering and *kpo-fire*. Thus, instead of losing completely, they felt that losing their land but gaining it financially was a welcome development, notwithstanding its illegality. The barrier to joining a business is not much compared to the significant income gained from sales. It is even more surprising that children and women are involved in bunkering and *kpo-firing* with their husbands and brothers.

Another reason for the growing trend of oil bunkering and *kpo-fire* is the lack of government-owned refineries in Nigeria. Nigeria is a great country with an enormous petroleum deposit. Since the discovery of oil in 1956, several refineries have been built for oil extraction, but none have functioned as of 2023. Successive governments have tried to find solutions to this problem but have failed to resuscitate any of the refineries. This has increased the cost of fuel, kerosene, and gas in Nigeria. Thus, products from bunkering and *kpo-fire* activities seem to be cheaper than refined products imported by the Nigerian government. In Ruth's idea,

I use kerosene a lot. Kerosene from kpo-fires is cheaper than that from legal filling stations. There is no money for me to be buying costly products when I know that I can buy them cheaper from a close source. (Interview 2)

This has caused some Nigerians to patronize the bunkers. Barnett elucidated that these local refiners, that is, those involved in bunkering and *kpo-fire* were interested in producing three products: gasoline, diesel, and kerosene (Barnett, 2023). It is crucial to note that while gasoline offers the highest profit margins, its production complexity makes it mainly controlled by large-scale illegal operations run by militant groups who possess the necessary networks to distribute products across regional and international markets. In contrast, smaller operators who engage in oil theft for basic survival typically focus on diesel and kerosene production, since these fuels have strong local demand throughout the delta region and require less expensive transportation and distribution arrangements compared to gasoline.

In addition, the lack of employment for the increasing youth population has contributed to an increasing number of bunkering camps in the Niger Delta. In the word of Jude:

Most of us who go into oil bunkering do so because of the lack of jobs. We cannot stay idle, and people from other states will come into our land to take our jobs. I am a graduate, yet I have nothing to do. I must do what I have close to me. (Interview 6)

Some of the youth in the Niger Delta are graduates. Owing to frustration, peer pressure, family pressure, and personal pressure, they are forced to join the oil bunkering business. They are not happy when they see their friends who have not graduated making good money, while those who are graduates cannot even feed themselves.

## 5. Impact of Oil Bunkering and *Kpo-fire*

### Water Pollution

First, it pollutes the region's water. In the Niger Delta, oceans, rivers, lakes, and streams provide water for humans and animals in the region. Unfortunately, when gasoline pipes are broken and petroleum products are stolen, the gasoline will flow down (spill) into streams, oceans, rivers, and lakes in the area. Most of the well heads and pipes of oil companies that are laid from the exploration point to the point of exploitation are laid in the rivers.

In addition, the actions of those involved in the *Kpo-fire* affected the environment of the people in the Niger Delta. The surface water at Creeks is affected. When pipes are broken and transported into gallons and drums, some of the liquid is poured on the ground and flows into streams. Furthermore, the military often disposes of the seized gasoline by pouring it into streams and rivers, with little regard for the health and safety of the local residents. At other times, they accept bribes and deliberately ignore the activities of those involved. In the words of Rukewe:

Many military checkpoints were held before the refinery. However, you still see the bunkering camps going on close to where the military checkpoints are located. I heard from a close friend that military people were given money not to expose the activities going on in the bunkering camps. These camps are owned by connected people who have friends in the military and usually ensure that their friends in the military are sent to their communities to protect their interests. (Interview 5)

In most communities, oil is present in drinking water. According to Akpan (2016) and Nriagu, Udofia, Ekong, and Ebuk (2016), spilled oil is the cause of pollution, which causes ecocide in aquatic life and, in turn, affects the living conditions of people who depend on water resources.

This has led to the death of many aquatic animals. Some of the spills from the bunkered well heads find their way into water bodies. They have succeeded in killing fish, crayfish, and other aquatic animals. In fact, even aquatic animals that remain alive become poisonous to the health of people in the Niger Delta region. Worrisome are the activities of security agencies in the area. Mangan (2015) reported that the Nigerian Navy dismantled 260 unauthorized refining operations by setting fire to the facilities and, on occasion, releasing confiscated petroleum into waterways, thereby worsening ecological harm in specific

Niger Delta communities. Since numerous residents of the Niger Delta rely on fishing as their primary source of income, the contamination of water bodies and resulting death of marine life have left them without work and struggling economically.

### **Soil/Farmland Degradation**

Arable farming and farmlands have been negatively affected by spills from oil bunkering and *kpo-fire*. Most farmlands in the Niger Delta are struggling to produce better yields. There are instances where some of the produce is already poisoned by spills that are spread in the soil. Vegetables become poisoned when oil spills from pipes leak without control. The land where *kpo-fire* is being carried out has been rendered useless because the people involved in this activity use jerry cans and buckets to carry these petrol products to places of refining in the process of transportation, most of the petrol falls on the soil, vegetables, and other produce, killing them instantly or rendering them poisonous for consumption by the people of the region. In the words of Blessing, “I have farmland but cannot farm there. Illegal refineries have damaged my land. Most byproducts flow into the farmlands. I cannot even enter. Some of the crops I planted died, and those that survived did not do well at all.” (Interview 3)

Some people in the Niger Delta depend on farming as a mode of sustenance. With their farmlands destroyed due to oil spills, they are unemployed, and the produce that they would have used to feed their children is also lost.

### **Air Quality/Health Issues**

The surrounding air environment in the Niger Delta has also been affected by bunkering and *kpo-fire* activities. Those who illegally refined the petrol usually used firewood as a heat source to aid in the fractional distillation of the stolen petrol. When firewood is burned and a drum of petrol is placed on the firewood, it leads to air pollution, contaminating the air, and women are the most vulnerable. In addition, if it condenses on the roofs of the surrounding houses in the delta region, it leads to rapid corrosion of the roofs. People inhale this air and face dire consequences.

There is also an increasing level of soot formation in the air owing to the incomplete combustion of petrol in *kpo-fire* sites. Oghenkewe recalls that:

I do not even know what is sooth. All I know is that people are experiencing sickness here and there. If you do not say it now. I do not even know that what the bunkering camps are doing can cause a serious thing like sooth. (Interview 4)

In the words of Stephen:

I took my wife and children and traveled out of Port Harcourt. I do not want them to develop health diseases like other people in my village, where oil bunkering activities are ongoing. I

abandoned all my businesses and came to the town. I know we are not finding things easy, but I am prepared to endure rather than develop any health challenge. (Interview 1)

Unfortunately, many of the youths, men, children, and women who engage in oil bunkering and *kpo-fire* in the Niger Delta do so because their environment has been destroyed by the exploration activities of multinational oil companies operating in the region. However, a closer look at things on the ground reveals that the oil bunkering and *kpo-fire* that the people engaged in had led to worsening climate change. Thus, the two wrongs cannot make the right. It was on this premise that Vreÿ (2012) and Ghazvinian (2007) noted that not one of the three major parties to the conflict (the Nigerian state, oil companies, and local groups/leaders) stands innocent as to the range of violent events that continue to plague this resource-rich, ecologically sensitive, and densely populated region.

**Table 2**

*Selected Cases of Kpo-fire's Devastation of Human and Environmental Resources*

Case	Date	Source
A fire explosion in a bunkering camp led to the death of twelve people in Rumuekpe community in Emohua Local Government Area of Rivers State	March 3, 2023	Ibunge (2023)
More than 100 people died during a fire explosion in a bunkering camp in the Abaezi community in the Ohaji-Egbema Local Government Area of Imo State	April 22, 2022	Okeoma & Naku (2022)
More than four persons died after a fire explosion in a bunkering camp, Rumuji-Ibaa River in Emuoha Council of Rivers State, and seven persons got serious injuries	April 30, 2021	Godwin (2021)
Fire explosion in a bunkering camp caused the death of ten persons (including a husband, wife, and the single son of a family) in Uzuaku Community in Ukwa West Local Government Area of Abia State	May 8, 2022	Nwachukwu (2022)
Fire explosion in a bunkering camp led to the death of more than six persons in Owaza, Ukwa West local government area of Abia State	August 21, 2022	Sampson (2022)

*Note.* Authors' compilation.

There are also reports that multinational oil companies have corroded equipment, such as corroded pipes and well heads. These corroded pipes and well heads sometimes leak gasoline into the streams and farmlands of the people in the region. The spills destroy everything around them, including the forests and water. When people report these multinational oil companies, they refuse to do anything and instead use security to harass the people of the community who try to protest against the spill. This has led to ecocide in the region because land, aquatic animals, and plants are being destroyed. According to Christian observations,

Multinational oil companies usually claim to have repaired damaged pipelines or wellheads, but we continue to see the spill. In fact, there are reports that some top management staff

sponsor those who are scooping petrol from the damaged pipeline for local refining and sale.  
(Interview 11)

In addition, some of the illegal refining sites operate with chimneys that are not health-compliant. They use poorly constructed chimneys that fail to properly release smoke and gases into the atmosphere, causing harmful emissions to linger in the environment. It is due to some of the very bad chimneys used by the illegal refining sites that have resulted in the firebreaks that have killed, maimed, and destroyed the environment of the people of the Niger Delta. In the Niger Delta as well as in other areas, fire usually breaks out in areas of oil spills. When there is a fire outbreak, the vegetation is destroyed, causing desertification and famine (Nuttall & Marks, 2017). The table below shows cases of fire outbreaks at *kpo-fire* sites.

Most fire outbreaks in the Niger Delta affected women and children. Exacerbation of asthma, lung cancer, chronic bronchitis, and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease in women and children, as well as irritation of the respiratory tract (cough, catarrh, tears), allergies, irritation of the eyes and skin, and irritation of the skin and eyes (Oyadongha, 2021). This is because women and children are employed at these illegal refining sites to make ends meet. In Chidera's opinion,

I used to help the youth work in bunkering camps to buy food. They pay me very well. That was the money I used to care for my children. However, when I saved a lot, I told them that I could not continue to work with them. It is the money from the job I used to have that I used to open this shop you are seeing. (Interview 10)

In addition, properties and farmlands worth millions of Naira have been destroyed by fire outbreaks at bunkering sites.

## 6. The Role of Religious Leaders in Tackling Oil Bunkering

Religious leaders play a crucial and multifaceted role in addressing the persistent problem of oil bunkering in Nigeria's Niger Delta region, serving as moral authorities, community mediators, and agents of social transformation in an area plagued by environmental degradation, economic marginalization, and widespread illegal petroleum activities. Nigeria is in Africa, and the African worldview creates a nexus between man and the divine through care for the environment. The African world is a worldhood that exists in unity with its creator, and the community expresses its realization of this by maintaining the relationship through caring for nature (Kanu, 2021).

### Moral Authority

In the Niger Delta, where oil bunkering has become both a survival strategy for impoverished communities and a major source of environmental destruction, religious leaders occupy a unique position

of trust and influence that enables them to bridge the gap between affected communities, government authorities, and oil companies. Bartholomew advised that,

The religious leaders, like the reverend fathers, the Imam, and the pastors, should also be preaching to the youth in their churches on the dangers of bunkering and kpo-fire. Furthermore, they can also advise the government to work in union with the youth and utilise their skills in oil refining. (Interview 13)

These spiritual figures, representing various Christian denominations and traditional religious practices prevalent in the region, leverage their moral authority to condemn the illegal siphoning of crude oil while simultaneously advocating for the underlying socioeconomic issues that drive community members toward such activities. The traditional priests have youth who are loyal to them. According to Jude,

So many youth in the Niger Delta are returning to African Traditional religion. The native doctors who are manning the shrines could also conscientise their followers, who are mostly youth, on the dangers of engaging in illegal oil refining and how it could lead to the pollution of sacred spaces. (Interview 15)

Their approach typically involves preaching against the environmental and spiritual consequences of oil theft while calling for legitimate economic opportunities and fair resource allocation.

### **Advocacy**

African religious life is dynamic and pluralist because it integrates three major currents of faith, which are Christianity, Islam, and African Indigenous traditions, and a diversity of subgroups and alternative or interstitial communities (Manglos-Weber, 2023). The effectiveness of religious intervention stems from the deep spiritual consciousness of Niger Delta communities, where religious beliefs significantly influence daily decision-making and community behaviour. Religious leaders utilize their platforms during worship services, community gatherings, and traditional ceremonies to educate congregants about the long-term environmental consequences of oil bunkering, including water pollution, soil contamination, and the destruction of fishing grounds that have sustained local livelihoods for generations. They frame the issue not merely as an economic crime but as a moral and spiritual transgression that threatens the sacred relationship between communities and their ancestral lands. According to Reuben,

Ancestral lands are meant to be preserved. When youth engaged in oil bunkering and kpo-fire, it could lead to explosions that destroy land and homes. Many people are displaced from their ancestral lands. Religious leaders are meant to advocate for the protection of the environment. (Interview 14)

## Mediation/Conflict Resolution

African religions are based on oral cultures, which makes mediation easier (Clarke & Byrne, 1993). Beyond moral persuasion, religious leaders actively engage in conflict resolution and dialogue facilitation between various stakeholders in the oil bunkering crisis. They serve as trusted intermediaries who can communicate with both the perpetrators of oil theft and government security forces without being perceived as partisan or threatening. Gideon says that,

The religious leader could always provide useful information to the government and advise the government on how to handle the youth in their bunkering activities. Most of the youth are members of churches, mosques, and even shrines. The religious leader could also organise meetings between the government and the youth involved in kpo fire in the affected locality, with the aim of getting to the root causes of the increasing involvement of youth in oil bunkering and kpo-fire. (Interview 12)

This neutrality allows them to organize peace meetings, negotiate ceasefires during militant activities, and create safe spaces for dialogue about alternative economic opportunities. Many religious leaders have successfully convinced young people involved in oil bunkering to abandon such activities by offering alternative livelihood programs, skills training, and spiritual rehabilitation within their religious communities.

The advocacy role of religious leaders extends beyond their immediate congregations to national and international platforms, where they highlight the root causes of oil bunkering, including environmental injustice, corporate irresponsibility, and government neglect of Niger Delta communities. They collaborate with civil society organizations, human rights groups, and international religious bodies to draw attention to the humanitarian crisis underlying the oil bunkering phenomenon. Through their networks, they pressure both government and multinational oil corporations to implement meaningful corporate social responsibility programs, provide adequate compensation for environmental damage (Nwoke, 2016), and ensure that oil revenues benefit local communities rather than enriching distant elites. Religious leaders also contribute to addressing oil bunkering through community development initiatives that provide legitimate economic alternatives to illegal oil activities. Many religious organizations in the Niger Delta operate schools, healthcare facilities, vocational training centers, and microfinance programs that offer young people viable pathways out of poverty without resorting to oil theft. These faith-based development programs often succeed where government initiatives fail because they enjoy greater community trust and are perceived as genuinely committed to local welfare rather than political gain.

The challenge facing religious leaders in this context involves balancing their condemnation of illegal activities with their pastoral responsibility to understand and address the desperate circumstances that drive community members toward oil bunkering. They must navigate the complex dynamics of a region where

traditional fishing and farming livelihoods have been destroyed by oil pollution, where unemployment rates are incredibly high, and where many young people see oil bunkering as their only means of survival (Ugor, 2013; Okolo & Anthony, 2019). This requires religious leaders to be both prophetic voices calling for justice and compassionate counsellors who provide practical support to those seeking to change their circumstances. Furthermore, religious leaders face the delicate task of maintaining their credibility while operating in an environment where some members of their own communities, including influential individuals, may be involved in or benefiting from oil bunkering activities. They must demonstrate moral courage in speaking truth to power within their own communities while avoiding alienating those they seek to influence. As God's representatives in the eyes of the people and based on their divine calling, Nigerian Christian leaders are called to be with the people and for the people (Agbiji & Swart, 2013). This often requires a sophisticated understanding of local politics, economics, and social dynamics, as well as the ability to offer concrete alternatives rather than merely moral exhortations.

### **Interfaith Cooperation**

The interfaith dimension of religious leadership in addressing oil bunkering reflects the religious diversity of the Niger Delta, where Christian denominations, traditional African religions, and Islamic communities coexist. Successful anti-bunkering initiatives often involve collaboration between different religious traditions, presenting a unified moral voice that transcends denominational boundaries. In the words of Jude,

It is only the collaboration of the religious leaders of the three major religions that could bring an end to the increasing oil bunkering and kpo-fire activities in the Niger Delta. This is because the Christian religious leader can only convince Christian youth, the Muslim religious leader can only convince the Muslims, and the priests of African Traditional Religion can convince the followers of traditional religion of the implications of their activities. (Interview 15)

This interfaith cooperation strengthens the legitimacy of religious intervention and demonstrates that the condemnation of oil bunkering represents shared moral values rather than sectarian interests. The international connections of religious leaders provide additional leverage in addressing oil bunkering, as many maintain relationships with overseas religious organizations, development agencies, and advocacy groups that can amplify their message and provide resources for alternative development programs. Christian explained that,

These international organisations could be called to help in providing jobs for the youth of the Niger Delta. This could be done through putting them in learning a trade or a skill, or to serve as environmental advocates under the payroll of these international organisations. (Interview 11)

These international networks enable local religious leaders to frame the Niger Delta oil bunkering crisis within broader global conversations about environmental justice, corporate accountability, and sustainable development.

However, the effectiveness of religious leadership in tackling oil bunkering is ultimately constrained by larger structural factors beyond their direct control, including national economic policies, international oil markets, corruption in government and security agencies, and the limited capacity of religious organizations to provide economic opportunities at the scale required to address widespread poverty in the region. While religious leaders can influence attitudes, provide moral guidance, and create small-scale alternatives, the comprehensive solution to oil bunkering requires coordinated action by government, corporations, and civil society that addresses the fundamental inequities and environmental destruction that make illegal oil activities attractive to desperate communities. Nevertheless, the moral authority, community trust, and practical engagement of religious leaders remain essential components of any effective strategy to address the complex challenge of oil bunkering in the Niger Delta.

A more effective approach would involve transforming these illegal operations into legitimate government refineries while hiring the current operators, whose expertise could prove valuable in managing refinery operations. It's essential for both the government and oil companies to create employment opportunities for young people in the region. The Nigerian government should collaborate with those financing these illegal activities and utilize their refining expertise for legitimate petroleum processing. Additionally, the government should establish formal agreements with oil companies operating in the area, requiring them to repair damaged pipelines and wellheads while cleaning up contaminated lands belonging to the Niger Delta communities. To prevent corruption, the government should also implement regular rotation of security personnel deployed to the Niger Delta, preventing them from developing inappropriate relationships with those involved in illegal oil activities.

## 7. Conclusion

The article shows that oil bunkering and kpo-fire have caused enormous damage to lives and livelihoods in the Niger Delta region, which includes pollution of water and farmlands. However, the study further shows that the increasing number of youth involved in illegal oil refining is necessitated by some factors, which include financial factors and feelings of relative deprivation. All demographic groups in the Niger Delta – men, women, young people, and children – face significant risks from illegal oil operations. While multinational petroleum corporations bear responsibility for the environmental crisis in the Niger Delta, the deteriorating climate conditions can be attributed to the growing number of illegal refineries and associated fires throughout the region. This situation has resulted in widespread ecological destruction, causing contamination of air, water, and soil with serious health consequences. Although the Nigerian government has typically relied on military intervention to address this problem, illegal bunkering activities have

continued to expand. Thus, this study sees religious leaders as a new avenue to test-run in the quest for a solution to the increasing oil bunkering and kpo-fire activities in the Niger Delta. There is an utmost need to integrate religion into environmental governance frameworks in the various states in the Niger Delta and also at the federal level, such as in organisations like the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation and the upstream and downstream sections of the Nigerian petroleum sector of the economy. Religious leaders of Christianity, Islam and African Traditional Religion should call on their followers, especially the youth, to desist from creating harm to themselves and their ancestral lands with continued oil bunkering. They should be made to see the resources of the Niger Delta as a blessing rather than as a curse. Furthermore, the religious leaders would serve as mediators between the government and the youth involved. They could advise the government on the need to provide jobs for the youth in the Niger Delta region.

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