AHABA-JOURNAL OF CREATIVE ARTS. Vol. 2, No2, July-December, 2026
Article history Received 24-05-2026 Accepted 14-09-2026

INDIGENOUS PERFORMANCE AND THE ECO-POLITICAL CONSEQUENCES OF OIL-EXTRACTION IN OHAJI-EGBEMA, IMO STATE NIGERIA

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Abstract

There is no doubt that the Niger Delta region has remained the oil hub of Nigeria since the nation transited from the agrarian economy to an oil-based economy. It is also clear that oil exploration from this region has contributed over eighty percent to the nation's GDP. However, as the nation boasts of several oil fields and wells, ecological pressures continue to mount in the region impacting the quality of life, modes of survival, and socio-cultural survival. The oil-sustained environmental despoliations have been the foundation of several protests between indigenes and oil-corporations in the region. Beginning from the peaceful protests to the militant approaches, the indigenes, oil-corporations and government stakeholders have continued to clash over the despoliations of land, water and air in the region prompting several interventions towards peace in the region. This study observes that the several approaches to foster peace are not only hierarchical and exclusive, but are anthropocentric in nature to the exclusion and plunder of environmental resources that sustain life in the region. Using the theory of embodied learning and relying on the arts-based approach of the qualitative research method, the study explores how indigenous performative could render petro-extractive harm visible and subject to public discussions towards sustainable futures. Sited in Ohaji-Egbema area of Imo State, the performance titled Mezie Obodo unveils the affordances of embodiment and co-creation creating safe spaces for interaction among indigenes, oil-corporations and government. The research recommends a more inclusive approach in eco-political dealings with host communities and indigenous performative structures can be harnessed to reach this goal especially as environmental pressures continue to mount on the global scale.

Keywords: Mezie Obodo Project, Ohaji-Egbema, Petro-extraction, ecology, Indigenous Performance

Introduction

> We live in a world where humans must struggle to regain their humanity by going back to history to locate their connection with nature and redefine their civilization. As the world now yearns for a new civilization that underscores or common heritage in mother earth and life, a critical understanding of issues in ecoliteracy becomes imperative (Uzoji, 2018: p. 19)

The Niger Delta occupies a central position in Nigeria's petroleum economy, yet the material wealth generated from its oil resources has been accompanied by persistent ecological and socio-economic pressures on oil-producing communities. Oil exploration and production have altered the quality of land, water and air while disrupting farming, fishing and other livelihood practices that sustain local populations. Recent scholarship confirms that oil exploitation in the Niger Delta is associated with environmental degradation, livelihood loss, food insecurity and health concerns, demonstrating that the consequences of oil exploration extend beyond pollution to the wider social and ecological conditions of community life (Gbadamosi & Aldstadt, 2025; Onwuka, 2005). In this context, Ohaji-Egbema in Imo State provides an important site for examining the relationship between oil extraction, ecological change and community experience.

The consequences of extraction are not experienced solely as isolated environmental events. They are embedded in relations among communities, state institutions, oil corporations and the environments upon which local livelihoods depend (Offor, 2023; Eberendubueze-Ogaraku and Ogaraku, 2018). Political ecology is useful here because it draws attention to the ways environmental conditions are shaped by unequal relations of power, competing interests and divergent understandings of resource use (Adger et al., 2001). Research on the Niger Delta similarly demonstrates that oil extraction has generated interconnected ecological, political and socio-economic effects, including the degradation of aquatic environments and the weakening of traditional livelihoods (Allen, 2018; Mbachaga, 2018). The environmental consequences may also unfold gradually and become normalized within everyday life. Nixon's (2011) concept of "slow violence" is particularly useful for understanding forms of environmental harm whose effects accumulate over time and are therefore difficult to render immediately visible.

Yet, the visibility of ecological harm is not merely a question of producing more information about extraction. It is also a question of how affected communities articulate, experience and communicate the consequences of environmental change. In the Niger Delta, the persistence of extractive pressures has produced a complex field of protest, negotiation, resistance and community grievance. Karmakar (2024) and Ratcliffe (2019) for instance, links oil extraction in the region to environmental injustice, livelihood disruption, slow violence and epistemic injustice, emphasizing the importance of attending to the ways affected communities experience and interpret extractive conditions. This suggests the need for approaches capable of bringing local experiences and embodied forms of knowledge into eco-political conversations that are frequently dominated by institutional, technical or managerial perspectives. This idea finds corroboration in the thoughts of Uzoji in the epigram above.

Indigenous performance provides one such possibility. In many African contexts, song, dance, storytelling, mime and ritual are not simply aesthetic forms but modes through which communities communicate knowledge, history, values and collective experience. Applied theatre scholarship further demonstrates the capacity of participatory performance to engage communities around social and developmental concerns and to create communicative spaces in which local experiences can be articulated (Ebewo, 2017). The significance of such performance for the present study lies not in its capacity to solve the material problems produced by oil extraction, but in its capacity to make those problems perceptible, narratable and discussable through embodied and collective forms.

It is within this context that this study examines *Mezie Obodo*, a community-based performance project developed in Ohaji-Egbema, Imo State. Drawing on embodied learning and an arts-based qualitative approach, the study investigates how indigenous performance can render the ecological and social consequences of oil extraction visible while creating opportunities for dialogue among community members and other stakeholders. The performance mobilises indigenous songs, dance, mime, dramatic action and personification to trace changing relationships between people, land and water, from an imagined pre-extractive order to the disruptions associated with colonial intervention, petroleum extraction, environmental degradation and subsequent community responses. Rather than presenting performance as a substitute for environmental remediation or institutional intervention, the study understands it as a situated mode of inquiry and dialogue through which extractive consequences can be collectively encountered and interpreted. The study therefore asks: how can indigenous performance make petro-extractive harm perceptible, and how might embodied and co-created performance contribute to more inclusive eco-political dialogue in oil-producing communities?

Theoretical Framework

This study is principally anchored in embodied learning theory, which understands learning and knowledge formation as processes that emerge through the interaction of body, mind, environment and social experience. Its theoretical foundation is closely related to embodied cognition, which challenges the assumption that cognition occurs independently of bodily and environmental experience. Wilson (2002) identifies situatedness, action and the body's relationship with its environment as important dimensions of embodied cognition, suggesting that knowing is inseparable from the conditions in which bodies act and perceive. In arts and drama education, this perspective has informed approaches that understand movement, gesture, performance and participation as ways of producing and communicating knowledge rather than merely illustrating knowledge already acquired. Branscombe (2015), for example, demonstrates how tableau can function as collaborative embodied learning in which participants use bodily action to construct and communicate meaning. Similarly, Flynn (2025) explicitly connects drama with embodied learning by showing how dramatic activity can move learning from abstract conceptualisation into bodily and situated action.

Embodied learning is particularly relevant to *Mezie Obodo* because the project does not treat community knowledge as information to be extracted from participants and subsequently converted into a conventional textual account. Rather, experiences of environmental change are translated into songs, movements, gestures, mime, dramatic situations and personification.

Knowledge about damaged land, contaminated water, declining livelihoods and changing relationships with the environment is therefore encountered through bodily and performative processes. The body becomes both a medium of representation and a site through which environmental experience is communicated. The theory consequently allows this study to regard performance not simply as an object of analysis but as a mode through which participants can generate, negotiate and communicate knowledge about petro-extractive harm.

The participatory dimension of embodied learning is equally important. The *Mezie Obodo* project involved researchers and community participants in a co-creative process in which information gathered through field engagement was transformed into performance and subsequently opened to discussion. Such an approach corresponds with recent work on applied theatre that identifies co-creation as a means of producing embodied, relational and negotiated forms of knowledge (van Houte & Rast, 2024). It also resonates with research demonstrating that applied theatre can provide spaces in which marginalised experiences acquire an embodied voice and become available for collective engagement (Vettraino et al., 2017). Thus, embodied learning provides the theoretical basis for understanding the performance as a process of knowing-with-others rather than simply communicating information to an audience.

Methodology

This study practice-led in approach consisting of site-visits, practice-based intervention, interviews, observation, and community-based performance. It also adopts the library research for establishing, interrogating and validating claims around the subject of petro-extraction, aqua-terrestrial devastation and agitations in the Niger Delta. The library adoption will also establish the affordances and utilities of the embodied learning theory within the frame of the study. Couched as a community performance-based research on oil-extraction and ecological consequences, the chosen site for exploration is the Ohaji-Egbema region of Imo State. Interviews targeted oil workers, community leaders, community members, officials of government and environmental agencies including the Imo State Oil Producing Areas Development Commission (ISOPADEC). The interviews targeted issues and lived experiences around oil-extraction in the region from stakeholders—community residents, oil workers, and officials in related government agencies. The data gathered were crystalised into themes which formed the crafting of the play. The research consisted of three interconnected sections—pre-production, production, and intervention. The pre-production phase consisted of the site visits, interviews, and play development and rehearsals. The production phase was marked by the staging of the Mezie Obodo performance which paved the way for the intervention phase which consisted of dialogues between the researchers and participants about the subject matter of the performance. The researchers served as facilitators in the project and utilised applied theatre ideals involving performance co-creation with members of the community. Analysis followed thematic interpretation which was done in line with the focus of the study. The participants in the process of the project from site-visits to data gathering duly consented to this project and were not in any way coerced into participation in any capacity.

Mezie Obodo Project and the Politics of Petro-extractive Harm in Ohaji-Egbema

Synopsis

Beginning with folk songs about a peaceful environment and its people, the performance takes a historical approach showing the indigenous ways of life and their relationships with themselves and nature. The culmination of these precolonial beginnings was a celebration in which Ohaji indigenous people sang and thanked the gods for the gift of land and water, showcasing their abundant crop grown in the Ala-Oke (boundary regions). At the conclusion of the celebration dance, Igwe (the King) declared that the following farming season will take place at the community's annexe, allowing the fields along the border to replenish their nutrients throughout the next two years.

As the King was still speaking to the villagers, a few white men wearing helmets and factory clothes entered with writing instruments, surveying equipment, and maps, while others brandished firearms. For the indigenous people, this signaled the arrival of colonial encroachment in Ohaji and a new reality. While some indigenous peoples were forced to load the cocoa, groundnut, palm, and rubber into trucks, other indigenous peoples were forced to farm the soil surrounding the village. The audience is guided through a time of land expropriation, labour commercialisation, and oil discovery through songs, expressive motions, and mime. Mayor (The colonial official) told the indigenous people that this finding would improve their socioeconomic situation, bring good fortune to them, and give them an advantage over all other nearby towns. He requests that the populace elect delegates who will act as go-betweens to oversee the oil industry and guarantee that the family of landowners and the community receive the revenues. The community celebrates with a dance after the cheers from the crowd.

Years later, a group of fishermen protest the oily streams and rivers that have significantly decreased fish populations and tainted drinking water by marching across the stage in a dance. The farmers also arrive with little harvests claiming that the land has been scorched by crude oil spills and that crops are hardly producing. The mayor ignored their pleas and directed them to see their representative, who embezzled the funds intended for community settlements and cleanups. The people march to Amadi's house, the community representative, in a show of rage, accompanied by protest songs. He informs them that the government keeps more than half of the oil profits and that what he receives at the end is hardly enough to support himself and his family. He also talks about cleaning up the area and settling landowners and the community. After deciding that the Whiteman must leave the country, the populace marches out. They shake hands, laugh, and dance out after the mayor stops by Amadi and gives him a bag of cash.

As the songs portray, the mayor and his men eventually leave the area, hand over to indigenous representatives and form a government, but the people's situation worsened as the new government's corruption and poor management caused the lands to burn and the waterbodies to become poisonous. Poverty increased in the area and because of the people's resentment of the government, protests ensues resulting in pipeline vandalism which triggered a fire event that killed and injured many Indigenous people. The youth turn to kidnapping employees of oil workers as another way to exert revenge on the government. Some others bunker pipes and engage in unlawful processing of oil in human and ecologically hazardous situations. At the height of these extractive activities, there was a rolling of the drum which made the characters freeze. Ala-Ohaji—the earth

goddess—enters to explain her suffering and vent her anger. Clad in black and oil-stained clothing, she describes how she has lost the pristine values that her people once attached to her and how she dies every day due to gas flares, oil spills, and the carelessness of those she has housed. As she exits the stage, she resolves to 'fight back'. In her words:

> I think I should open my belly wider more to swallow more of you before your prime. As you take life from me, I will take same from you. I will inflict you all with several sicknesses and finally pluck you out of existence before you get to 40 or less, so that you will do less harm to me ('Mezie Obodo', 2023).

This resolve leads to the dramatization the human consequences of sustained environmental degradation as the drums comes alive again to depict various characters running around and across the stage, reporting several issues including illness and shortened life expectancy. The performance renders this environmental retaliation through Ala-Ohaji's personification and her speech is a theatrical personification rather than a literal account of environmental causation, the health concerns it dramatizes resonate with documented evidence from crude oil-producing communities in Imo State. According to statistics from their research site, 75% of farmers in the region were at danger of hearing loss due to noise and vibrations caused by oil drilling companies' industrial operations. Furthermore, 94% of those polled stated that cancer-related health issues would be a major worry. Agricultural production loss due to farmland degradation is a major cause of food insecurity and associated health issues, such as malnutrition, that affects the entire community. According to all of the participants in their study, the extinction of aquatic and animal species worsens food poverty.

Findings

1. *Rendering Petro-Extractive Harm Visible*

A major finding of the *Mezie Obodo* project is that indigenous performance can make the cumulative consequences of oil extraction perceptible by translating environmental change into embodied theatrical action. The performance begins with songs, dance and dramatic representations of an earlier relationship between the people, land and water. This opening establishes the environment not simply as a physical resource but as part of the community's social and cultural life. The subsequent arrival of colonial officials, the appropriation of land, commercialisation of labour and discovery of oil mark a transition into increasingly extractive relations. Through song, mime, movement and dramatic action, the performance therefore places environmental degradation within a longer history of changing relationships between people, land and resource extraction. This historical trajectory is in line with the assertions of Scholars like Sunusi (2018) who reported on the Niger Delta thus;

> The exploration of petroleum in Nigeria began in 1908, however, …. Petroleum was discovered in commercial quantity at Oloibiri in Bayelsa state… This development has brought a lot of joy and great merriment for the inhabitants of this part of the country. Within a short time, the people observed how their environment was being damaged. Marine life was grossly affected, farmlands were polluted by

> oil spills while gas flares … still affecting the climatic condition as they released poisonous gasses into the atmosphere. (p, 98-99)

In line with the above report, performance makes the consequences of extraction increasingly tangible through the experiences of farmers and fishermen. Fishermen enter protesting polluted streams, declining fish populations and contaminated drinking water, while farmers report reduced harvests and the effects of crude-oil spills on agricultural land. These scenes shift ecological degradation from an abstract environmental problem to an embodied community experience involving food, livelihood and survival. The performance consequently demonstrates the value of embodied learning: environmental knowledge is not presented only as statistical information but is communicated through bodies that march, sing, gesture, mime and occupy the performance space.

This theatrical rendering also extends to the consequences of prolonged environmental degradation. The personification of Ala-Ohaji, the earth figure who enters in oil-stained clothing, provides the most concentrated expression of this environmental injury. Her theatrical suffering gives form to the cumulative effects of oil spills, gas flaring and the deterioration of the environment. Importantly, this personification should not be read as a literal claim that the environment possesses human agency or that environmental processes directly produce the specific illnesses represented on stage. Rather, it is a performative device through which otherwise dispersed ecological consequences become visible, audible and emotionally apprehensible.

The performance subsequently connects environmental degradation with human health and livelihood concerns. The accompanying research evidence identifies concerns about hearing loss associated with industrial noise and vibration, cancer-related health anxieties, declining agricultural production, food insecurity and the loss of aquatic and animal species. These findings strengthen the theatrical representation by demonstrating that the health and livelihood concerns dramatised in the performance correspond with documented experiences in oil-producing communities. In this sense, *Mezie Obodo* does not merely illustrate ecological degradation; it creates a performative structure through which its interconnected social, ecological and bodily consequences can be apprehended.

2. *Embodied and Co-Created Knowledge of Extraction*

A second finding concerns the capacity of the performance process to transform community experience into embodied knowledge. The project was developed through site visits, interviews, observation and engagement with community members, oil workers, community leaders and government and environmental officials. The information generated through these encounters was crystallised into themes that informed the development of the performance. Performance therefore functioned as part of the research process rather than merely as a product presented after the research had been completed.

The co-creative process is significant because the performance does not construct petro-extractive harm from an exclusively external or institutional perspective. Community experiences of land appropriation, polluted water, declining agricultural productivity, livelihood disruption and inadequate responses to environmental degradation become materials for theatrical construction.

The use of indigenous performance forms—songs, dance, expressive movement and mime—allows these experiences to be communicated through culturally familiar modes of expression. The body consequently becomes a site through which environmental knowledge is recalled, negotiated and communicated.

This embodied process also complicates a purely oppositional understanding of the conflict surrounding extraction. The performance does not present a simple division between an environmentally innocent community and a uniformly destructive external actor. Its narrative moves through colonial intervention, government formation, corruption, community protest, pipeline vandalism, kidnapping, illegal oil processing and their consequences. The resulting picture is one of competing agencies and responsibilities within an extractive environment. This complexity is important to the study because it demonstrates that indigenous performance can expose the relationships and responses that extraction produces rather than reducing petro-extractive harm to a single causal actor.

3. *Performance as a Space for Eco-Political Dialogue*

The third finding concerns the dialogical potential of performance. The *Mezie Obodo* project culminated not simply in the staging of the performance but in an intervention phase in which researchers and participants discussed the issues raised by the performance. This structure transformed the performance from a one-directional presentation into a forum for collective reflection. The significance of this process lies in its capacity to bring environmental experiences that are often fragmented across individual households, occupations and institutions into a shared space of encounter.

The dramatic structure itself facilitates such dialogue by staging multiple perspectives. Farmers, fishermen, community representatives, government officials, oil interests and the personified environment occupy the same theatrical world. Their conflicting interests and experiences expose the political dimensions of environmental degradation. The farmers' complaints about damaged land and reduced harvests, the fishermen's concerns about polluted water and declining fish populations, and the community's subsequent protests demonstrate that ecological harm is inseparable from questions of representation, compensation, governance and accountability.

The performance therefore creates what may be understood as a situated forum for eco-political deliberation. Its value does not reside in claiming to resolve the structural problems of oil extraction through theatre. Rather, it lies in making the consequences of extraction available for collective attention and discussion. The embodied form allows participants to encounter ecological degradation not only as a technical or governmental issue but as a lived condition involving land, water, livelihood, health and community relations. In this respect, the project supports the argument that indigenous performance can contribute to more inclusive environmental dialogue by creating spaces in which local experiences and knowledge can enter conversations that are often dominated by institutional actors.

At the same time, the findings caution against attributing transformative environmental power to performance alone. *Mezie Obodo* does not restore polluted environments, reverse extraction or independently resolve conflicts among communities, government and oil corporations. Its

contribution is more situated: it renders extractive consequences perceptible, assembles different experiences within a common performative space, and opens those experiences to discussion. The performance consequently operates as an embodied and dialogical practice through which the agencies, injuries and responsibilities surrounding petro-extraction can be encountered and questioned.

Discussion

Taken together, the findings demonstrate three interconnected affordances of indigenous performance in the context of petro-extraction. First, the performance makes slow and dispersed ecological consequences visible by giving them bodily, spatial and narrative form. Second, the co-creative process converts community experiences into embodied knowledge, allowing environmental concerns to be articulated through indigenous expressive forms. Third, the performance and its accompanying dialogue created a situated space in which competing interests, lived experiences and ecological responsibilities can be brought into public dialogue.

These findings reinforce the theoretical proposition of the study that environmental knowledge is not produced only through detached observation or technical measurement. In *Mezie Obodo*, knowledge emerges through movement, voice, memory, observation, participation and interaction. The performance consequently demonstrates the usefulness of embodied learning for understanding indigenous performance as a mode of knowledge production. Its relationship with political ecology is equally significant: the environmental problems represented on stage are inseparable from questions of power, resource control, governance and the distribution of environmental consequences. The concept of slow violence further clarifies why performance is important here: many of the harms represented do not appear as a single catastrophic event but accumulate through prolonged exposure, ecological degradation and livelihood disruption.

The overall finding, therefore, is not that theatre provides a solution to petro-extraction, but that indigenous performance can intervene in the politics of visibility and dialogue surrounding extraction. *Mezie Obodo* makes obscured consequences perceptible, places community experience alongside institutional and political interests, and creates a space in which the relationships between extraction, ecological injury and human survival can be collectively examined. Its significance lies precisely in this capacity to stage what extractive processes have rendered difficult to see, hear and discuss.

Conclusion

As ecological pressures continue to receive global attention, efforts towards rebuilding earth's resilience are consistently craved. Specifically for Global south nations especially the Niger Delta region, marked by colonial, capitalist and oil-driven ecological collapse, the mutating ecological outlook poses survivalist and existential questions about its futures. In addition, the case of ecological devastation have been approached from elitist frameworks inundated by exclusionist innuendos that alienate the community. This study has explored the affordances and utilities of indigenous performance to mediate petro-extractive harm in the Mezie Obodo performance. The use of embodied nuances in songs, mime, dances, and participation provided the context for learning and dialogue. The co-created nature of the performance afforded participants the avenue

to be part of the knowledge creation about their lived experiences which elicited genuine responses from the participants during the intervention. The intervention section sparked dialogue between members of the community about the veracity of the petro-extractive harm in the performance, its ecological and political corollaries as well as the future implications for the collective people of Ohaji-Egbema. While the production did not lead to any remediation and policy changes in real time, it provided the platform where such issues become discussable, rehearsed and felt in the present.

Mezie Obodo stages human irresponsibility and ecological testament on the conduits of indigenous performance which attest to the potency of indigenous performance to engage in ecological dialogue and awareness. Its ability to make ecological harm and crude-orchestrated environmental foilings perceptible can further be leveraged on in navigating the sustained ecological mutations in the Niger Delta. This novel introduction into ecological awareness by government and concerned parties can foster safe spaces for eco-political dialogues where ecological knowledge transits from the domain of broad-based knowledge to the domain of feeling—a factor hitherto missing in environmental campaigns in the Niger Delta.

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