

Re-Considering the Ogoni Indigenous Oath-Taking: A Step beyond Amnesty

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Abstract: *Ogoni, the once cherished and peaceful community has recently been characterized by unnecessary killings and destruction of lives and properties as a result of cult-related clashes and inter-communal conflicts. These activities have rendered many homeless and devastated; more so, the government's effort to curb the menace through amnesty has proved abortive as cultism and other related vices still persist. The situation is so bad that life amongst the deviant youths has no value; this is seen in the incessant destruction of lives and properties which necessitated the Rivers State Government to consider amnesty as a strategy to curb the menace. For this reason, this paper is hinged on the Ogoni indigenous oath-taking as a panacea to curtail the wanton destructions in Ogoni land. It will take into cognizance the types and socio-cultural significance of oath-taking as well as the Ogoni indigenous society in the contemporary age. Using the ethnographic and ethical approach it was established that the persistence in the alarming rate of proliferation of cult groups and criminal activities which is trending in Ogoni today, is a sharp contrast to what was obtained in the pre-modern era when indigenous measures like oath-taking were used in controlling crime. More significantly is the fact that the journey to ensure an atmosphere of justice, honesty, harmony and peaceful co-existence is beyond amnesty. Therefore, it is imperative to make good use of indigenous oath-taking which is within the people's cosmological perception in synergy with the modern approach of fighting crime.*

Keywords: *Re-considering, Oath-taking, Indigenous, and Amnesty*

INTRODUCTION

Ogoni is inhabited by an indigenous people in the southern part of Nigeria, who are innately religious. The people believe that they are surrounded by supernatural powers. Their socio-religious lives such as interpersonal relationship, dietary pattern, cosmology, the concept of life, death and the hereafter, as well as perception of socio-religious order

and concept of ritual practices all enhance the efficacy of oath-taking.

It is believed among the Ogoni indigenous people that nothing happens by chance; events such as death, disease, and misfortune, etc., were usually expressed as a consequence of personal grudges charged with the mystical power of sorcery or witchcraft, or the punitive action of ancestor spirits. Therefore at any point in fracture of socio-religious order, the people always make inquiries, consulting the oracle to ascertain what could be the cause and how to remedy the situation. Apart from oath-taking which is used as a mechanism for peace and confidence building, there are other institutions and methods which are also effective and highly respected as their decisions binding on all parties concerned. These include marriage institutions, ritual treaties, blood covenant, the celebration of inter-communal festivals, etc. They all function for the effective prevention, management, and resolution of conflict.

Ogoni, like every human society at various stages of their development, has been characterized by diverse forms of conflict. They are subject to the influence of all-natural and generally accepted theories on the causes of conflict such as different perceptions, needs, values, power, desire, goals, opinions and many other components of human interactions. While this is true, the most common sources of conflict among the Ogoni people today are land disputes chieftaincy tussle, marital conflict, inter-communal conflict, cult groups battle for supremacy and domination. In fact, "conflict in its many forms is therefore omnipresent fact of human existence."¹ As Hill rightly states, "like the poor, conflict is something we will always have with us."² Conflict is also interactional. According to Ukpabi,

It would appear that as soon as various groups settle in a given area, competitions might arise between them overland, water, resources, trade, and possession of strategic locations. In the ensuing struggle, the armed conflict could not be excluded³

Since conflict often includes dysfunctional and destructive components, many see the indigenous oath-taking as the right way and avenue of resolving all forms of disputes, especially where other known avenues have failed. This is more prominent in the traditional setting. However, in this era of social change, other means of dispute resolutions have emerged; many now doubt the rationale behind the indigenous oath-taking as a means of settling a dispute. Thus, this religious practice which hitherto occupies a central place in maintaining social stability is now being abandoned leaving the society in chaos. Hence, the following fundamental questions have been raised: what constitutes oath-taking, and does it worth reconsidering? What is the socio-cultural significance of oath-taking in the Ogoni indigenous society? How sustainable is the amnesty program in Ogoni land? This study is therefore relevant as it gives answers to the above-raised questions, using the ethnographic and ethical approaches.

CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION *CUM* DEFINITION

Oath-taking: Oath-taking is one of the core rituals in Africa which plays a very pivotal role in enhancing the peaceful co-existence of the people. African society is a dynamic one in which people interact with one another at different levels. The concept and practice of

oath-taking are not peculiar to non-literate societies. Thus, scholars have given it various definitions to meet their specific viewpoints.

Oath-taking in the African indigenous setting is an indispensable tool in ascertaining the truth and falsity of any issue, especially in conflict resolution. This is because it is premised on deities and ancestors who are believed to be 'the living dead'. The Ogoni people, like other Africans, believe in the potency of their deities and the existence of spirits that are readily available to punish offenders of the laws of the land. These punishments manifest in various forms such as swollen legs, stomach, incurable diseases, open confession, and death. The concept of oath-taking lies in the fear of the consequences if found guilty. Furthermore, the cosmological perceptions of the people give credence to the efficacy of oath-taking.

Oath is therefore defined as a statement or assertion made under penalty of divine retribution for international falsity. On the other hand, it is a solemn appeal to a god or something holy or revered as witness or sanction of the truth of a statement ⁴. It can be seen as a statement of fact or a promise calling upon something or someone that the oath-taker considers sacred, usually gods, ancestors or an important person ⁵. It is an adjuration, affirmation, covenant, declaration, duty, obligation, pledge, profession, promise, undertaking and vow ⁶. From the above views, Oath-taking is the process or procedure by which the oath-taker invokes a higher power in defense or to witness an affirmation or declaration of innocence or the truth of a statement.

Conflict: Conflict is part of society and will always need negotiations and interactions from a higher personality or phenomenon to resolve. Reason being that it is not easy for aggrieved persons to resolve their grievance without the interference of a third party; which often time is higher in ranking either by age or placement. Thus, different societies adopt measures of conflict resolution since it engenders harmonious living and development. That is why, among the Ogoni people, the deities are called to action once the conflict is prolonged. The last resort is oath-taking as it is believed that the deities will not pervert justice. Consequently, the fear of being punished by the deities elicits the truth from whoever is at fault. Based on the concept of deploying a higher force in the process of conflict resolution, harmonious living was experienced amongst the people.

Conflict takes various forms and dimensions in African societies; it is significant to note that there is a lack of consensus among scholars regarding the definition and use of the term 'conflict', "many scholars have noted vagueness, ambiguity and multiple uses of the term" ⁷. The conflict, however, seems to be part of the excitement for networking relationships, whether negative or positive⁸. Consequently, conflict is in the magnitude of rage, rift, misunderstanding, family and market brawls, skirmishes and wars, public insurrections and assault. Without delving into the various views on the concept, this paper conceptualized conflict as disputes and tension, as well as manifest or overt, clashed between social forces or groups. A condition in which the identifiable group of human beings whether tribal, ethnic, linguistic, religious, socio-political, economic, cultural or otherwise is in conscious opposition to one or more identifiable human groups because these groups are pursuing what could be incompatible goals ⁹. Implicate in this conception is the notion that conflict varies in magnitude from antagonistic relationships between groups to manifest violence or civil war.

Amnesty: Amnesty is an English word borrowed from a Greek word 'Amnesties' which refers to a legislative or executive act by which a state restores those who may have

been guilty of an offense against it to the position of innocence. It is more than pardon, as it obliterates all legal remembrance of the offense. It is used to express "freedom" and the time when prisoners can go free, of importance is that amnesty can be used by any given authority to bring citizens in compliance with the law instead of punishing them for their past offenses; it is a kind of reconciliation between offenders and the society¹⁰.

In Nigeria, this concept is in the center of the Federal Government Amnesty Scheme. To achieve development, peace and extremely essential because violence to the Niger Delta is propelled by poor social conditions such as property, exclusion, intimidations, ethnic majority chauvinism and most importantly the degradation of the ecosystem. By extension the Rivers State government under the administration of Chief Barrister Nyesom Wike, as the Executive Governor of Rivers State granted amnesty to Rivers State restive youth, and double opportunities were given to the Ogoni criminals and cult groups to surrender their arms and think of how to become meaningful to themselves and the society at large. However, the amnesty committee recorded little success in Ogoni based on what this paper term 'insincerity' from both sides (the government and the restive youth).

It is important to note that the Amnesty had among; other terms of reference to interface in the various cults related groups with a view of getting them lay down their arms, to set up a program for the retrieved and mopping up of arms from the groups, to plan for repentant members and to suggest strategies to forestall future occurrences.

Oath-Taking in Ogoni Indigenous Society

There is no authentic and reliable account of the origin of oath-taking in human society. It is probably a device that entered human society when the interpersonal relationship was established; the problem of mutual trust and sincerity became an obstacle to full and intimate social intercourse. Therefore, to abolish the problems of suspicion, lack of confidence and trust in each other, oath-taking mechanism was devised. Nwidede (Oral interview 2014) further added that, just like every other African society, the people of Ogoni before the advent of Christianity and its western influence were involved in certain activities, interactions that gave room to mistrust and conflict which led to the institution of oath-taking. Thus, the practice of oath-taking in Ogoni is seen as an aspect of people's ways of life. There is the existence of oath-taking in institutions such as marriage among members of the society and among people of the same profession it is also seen in rites of initiation of new members into some organizations such as traditional secret societies. Oath-taking does not only serve as a cohesive and unifying factor but also serves as a means or way of expressing their religious beliefs. Therefore, oath-taking ensures stability and peaceful co-existence among individuals, diverse groups and towns or villages. Oath-taking involves the divine as because the divine serves as a guarantor of the oath taker's honesty and integrity of the matter in question. By implication, this invokes divine displeasures if the oath-taker fails in their sworn deities. It, therefore, implies greater care than usual in the act of the performance of one's duty, such as in testimony to the fact of the matter (Nudee, oral interview 2004).

In considering what the oath-taker does, especially while invoking powers greater than oneself, to uphold the truth of a declaration, Richards added thus; the swearer makes an assertion that calls for higher power as a witness to his declaration and prays for punishment if found guilty.¹¹

Who Takes Oath?

In the Ogoni indigenous society, oath-taking implies or requires drinking or either sipping water (Maa) or mii-gini (dry gin) of the deity to be sworn with. In some instances, the oath-taker is also required to lick or eat Tee (a special species of fish) or Bung (bitter colla) from the deity to be sworn with. Thus, the procedures and methods of oath-taking are not static, because in most cases, the 'what' and 'how' for oath-taking are being determined by the deity to be sworn with.

To answer the question, who takes an oath? Gbaradeeker (oral interview 2015) asserted that a person who is accused, for example of stealing, murder, etc, is made to swear an oath for vindication. In some cases, the community demands that the accused person take an oath to prove that the charges against him/her are false, the family having questioned the person concerned (the accused) can also demand that their brother, son or relatives should be given the oath to prove his innocence.

In such a case, Tuasor (oral interview 2015) asserted that when the deity to be sworn has been called up, the priest is requested to take the oath first to prove to the people that nothing is added to the deity to undo or to kill the accused. After which the complainant will also take the oath to prove that there was no underground plan to kill the accused before the accused will take the oath. The oath is as presented below;

If I (the accused) have knowledge of the charges or if I am guilty of the charges which Mr. A. (the complainant) is accusing me of, this deity should kill me; but if I am innocent of these charges and accusations, may the deity spare my life.

After which the necessary rituals involves would be carried out before the deity is being sent back to where it was borrowed from. It is important to note that if the period given by the deity expires while the accused is still alive it then means the accused is innocent and certain amount would be paid to him/her, but if the accused before or within the period of isolation dies, then he is guilty of the charges. And the relatives would be asked to pay any amount charged by the complainant.

Type of Oath-Taking in Ogoni Indigenous Society

In Ogoni there are various types and instances in which oath-taking occurs, it also depends on the issue to be addressed. The oath can be direct or indirect and is taken at different places, and time as determined by the deity to be sworn. The various types of Oath-taking include the following.

1. Oath of Coronation (*Yii-Wu-Mene*)

This form of oath-taking takes place when a new king is being inaugurated and everyone in the community looks forward to seeing what is going to happen on the day of his coronation. For example, in Luawii Community (the traditional headquarter of Babbe kingdom), where the *Gbene-Mene 1* (King) of Babbe kingdom is being crowned. One of the criteria requires that for one to be coronated, such a person must have gone through the 'yaa rituals' which is accompanied by its initiation oath and must have to be a member of the *Ka-Baari* (elder's council) which also have its oath and rituals. Nwigbara (oral interview 2013) added that the person who is to be made *Gbene-Mene 1* of Babbe and the priest of 'bari-aayor' deity (who is in charge of the stool and also believed to be the first *Gbene-Mene 1* of Babbe kingdom) who is to be administering the oath of office both keep themselves pure

from certain things in order to maintain a level of purity. The priest makes prayers, that if after coronation the king sees evil and does it, snatches another man's wife, properties, take for himself what belongs to the community or kill a kinsman, the deity should kill him. The priest continues his prayer by saying that, in the hands of the king are clean, and then anyone who plans evil against the king or any member of his family should die, this type of oath-taking help to reduce corrupt practices in the community governance.

2. Oath of Boundary Adjustment (*Yii Yee Kuma-Nam*)

This type of oath of the agreement is administered at the adjusted site especially at the boundary in question. On administering this oath, having agreed on a particular point to be the boundary, some resilient trees like kionor, agbii and koor are generally known as tedium (tress that can survive the adverse effect of various whether), are being used to pin at the demarcation. Then, a goat is brought forward and slaughtered; the blood is allowed to enter into the hole on the ground at the agreed point of the boundary.

3. Oath of Inter-communal Disputes Resolutions (*Yii Wura Yee Buen*)

In the traditions of the Ogoni people, neighborhood and neighbourliness were highly restricted. The farther the blood-ties, the more distant and shallower the friendliness becomes. This is because there were often mutual tension and hostility between neighbouring towns, after then, other towns and more other clans were regarded as actual or potential enemies to be dealt with at the slightest provocation. No doubt, the ready-to-hand causes of this face-off include land disputes, murder to members of a particular town, maltreatment of the daughter of a town that married to another town; market quarrels, desecration of masquerades by members of another town and so on.

The resolution of this sort of conflict took the form of oath of agreement and plea bargaining between the two communities. After, representatives from both communities would meet to fashion out a lasting solution to the dispute. In event of this the oath is to be taken in one of the communities, the individuals from the offending or guilty community are selected but they are mostly those who participated during the war and elders of the community, they all move to the community square of the presumed victor or the agreed point of meeting the items for this type of oath-taking are being determined by the deity through the priest. The priest will libate after certain rituals must have been carried out and administer the oath with a declaration that peace and stability be restored among both communities, and that the deity should kill anyone that defies the oath. After which both communities can inter-marry visit each other, buy and sell and protect one another from danger.

4. Oath of Marriage (*Yii Ia-Dam*)

The Ogoni indigenous people see life as a continuum. To them, the human race is through adoption and procreation. Given the above, the family is the bedrock of every community and it serves as the nucleus of society. In Ogoni, families are formed through marriage and it's a societal affair. A boy and girl cannot conclude marriage procedures alone, the lineage families of the intended spouses must be involved to act as a witness to their marriage. The essence of this involvement is to secure the blessing of both the living and the departed ancestors of both families. In

this context, the place of oath-taking during the marriage cannot be over-emphasized, as it serves as a binding force in every marriage. Marriage is one of the celebrated functions among the people who bring two different persons and extended families together. After the intending husbands have paid the money to the intending wife and her parents, the oath-taking ceremony will now be on the day of the traditional marriage, usually at the girl's father's compound. At this point, the oath is between the two intending couples and the two extended families by eating and drinking together in gladness. The oath is administered either by the family head or the girl's father. The father libates putting the daughter and the husband under an oath to be faithful to each other, invoking curses upon anyone who would attempt to harm the family; thus, the oath of marriage is always more or less a blessing.

5. **Oath of Exoneration (*Yii Lea Ue-Loo*)**

Much has been said about this type of oath-taking. It is a situation whereby an accused person, family of the accused person or the community demands that the accused person be giving the oath to proof his/her innocence.

The Socio-Cultural Significance of Ogoni Indigenous Oath-Taking

The socio-cultural significance of the Ogoni indigenous oath-taking cannot be over-emphasized, considering how oath-taking enhances sustainable social stability; Maintenance of mutual trust and confidence as well as serve as a binding force between friends, groups, organizations, family members and the deity before whom the oath is taken. Oath-taking brings about the consciousness of the presence of the ancestors and deities through customs and traditions. Furthermore, the communal bond is cemented since it instills fear into the members of the community with none having the intention of harming his fellow. Thus, there is a sharing of virtually everything in the community; more so, there was value for people's lives when the ritual of the oath was very prominent. Oath defined the social structure of the people.

Oath-taking helps to maintain moral living among the Ogoni people, not just the individual but the community as a whole since the gods are believed to be the custodian of the laws and moral codes; hence a breach by an individual is presumed to be that of the corporate body to the gods. Thus, social harmony is realized through this means.

Ogoni Indigenous Society in the Contemporary Age

Ogoni the once cherished and peaceful nation has been characterized by unnecessary killings, especially those that would have brought development to the land. It is disheartening, that in Ogoni contemporary society, the youth as leaders of tomorrow who were supposed to be building and developing their knowledge, skills, work habits and character traits commonly seen as some of the demands of 21st century, especially in critical thinking, and problem solving, creativity, curiosity and innovations, self-discipline, perseverance and adaptability leadership and teamwork. Media and internet literacy, civil, ethical and social-justice literacy, economic and financial literacy, global awareness and multi-cultural literacy, environmental and conservative literacy, health and wellness literacy and comparative religious literacy, etc. Many of them now choose to stay in the bush as trigger pullers.

To an extent, one begins to wonder the kind of society the contemporary Ogoni

youth are preparing to hand down to the next generation, when every community in Ogoni are completely submerged with amorphous culture, which has influenced the people's cherished culture of hard work the fast-emerging metropolitan nature of the Ogoni society has overwhelmed the youth who are not skilled or equipped to adapt to the new survival strategies. It is not an aberration, therefore, to say that even the implementation of the UNEP Report (Ogoni Clean Up) that the Ogoni youth are clamoring for, will still be managed and control by outsiders, as some Ogoni youth prefer tenting and taskforce job, and other criminal means of acquiring wealth, which are in tandem with gangster and cultic features which are very exploitative and non-futuristic.

In Ogoni contemporary society, nobody cares to ask the source of one's wealth, which was an important principle or way of maintaining morality, as the people believe a good name is better than riches. This aspect of indigenous life has been bastardized all in the name of modernity. In fact, it is trending in the Ogoni contemporary society, that if one is wealthy and he/she is able to spend the money to control all the criminals and cult groups in his camp, such person is referred to as 'being on ground' and the society will honour such person and he/she becomes popular. Hence, the quest for money, positions, and appointment, etc. with less stress has made 'evil' more attractive with its short cut and 'good' neglected with its handwork and processes.

The high level of "political prostitution" (the culture of jumping from one party to another) that is common in Ogoni, is not for the betterment of any Ogoni person but for their personal and family "stomach infrastructure," thus, such culture of decamping from one party to another is a calculated plan to put food on their table, embezzled public funds and acquire properties for themselves, they empower their children with 'pen' to study in the best university abroad, while they empower the youth with 'arms' to secure them and kill perceived opponents, they buy milk and honey for their children and family to drink while they buy *Ogogoro* and *Kai-kai* (intoxicative dry gin) for the youth to drink. In spite of all these evil, the Ogoni contemporary society continues to sing praises to these politicians.

There is an unprecedented pleasure of youth using all kinds of weapons to take away the life of their fellow youths daily. Life has no meaning again in Ogoni communities. There is no longer any sense of guilt or remorse in spilling blood among the people. All manner of youth restiveness and social vices are now found in Ogoni as a result of arming youth for electoral purposes by politicians, has culminated to paid assassinations, kidnapping and all manner of terrorism, now seen as an attractive trends, thus, the proliferation of cult groups from primary school, secondary to tertiary institutions invariably spell doom for the future of the Ogoni nation.

Worst still is the fact that community leaders have lost control in many communities due to the activities of the armed and lawless youths. The youth are in charge of community leadership in many Ogoni communities. Some chiefs are either killed, while many are chased out of the community with their properties and houses destroyed. Mutual suspicion has been accentuated by the struggle for supremacy among different cult groups. Movement for the survival of the Ogoni People (*MOSOP*) and *KAGOTE* (the Ogoni Apex Socio-Cultural Organization) that were supposed to drive in development and as well serve as an agent of peace, has, unfortunately, been turned or seen as an extension of political parties without any tangible achievement to show.

Sequel to this, considering the successful mopping of arms by amnesty committee and the continuous or renewed cases of the beheading of human beings, kidnapping and

killing both innocent members of the society and opposing cult groups. It is, therefore, prodding to ask; how sustainable was the amnesty programme that the repented criminals and cultists still engage in those criminal activities they claimed to have repented from? And if all arms have been recovered or mopped out, what are these boys using to operate now or does it mean, the amnesty committee did not get the real criminals and cult groups?

The whole issue, therefore, boiled down to 'sincerity' is the government and politicians sincere, and what are the mechanism, road maps, or blueprints in educating this repentant cultist to make them useful to the society again? Furthermore, in a situation where by all politicians seem to protect their interest by having the most dreadful criminals and cult groups in their camp, in a situation where by villages and community leaders are preparing and hiring powerful equipment for land disputes and communal conflict, in a situation whereby Icelanders want to dominate and the *Deegbam* are also fighting to dominate. In these situations with divergent interest and views, the steps to restore harmony and peaceful co-existence are far beyond amnesty.

It was in this view that the Niger Delta militant leader, Solomon Ndigbara, Aka Osama Bin Laden dismissed the paucity of weapons surrendered by cultist and kidnappers in Bori as laughable when he said;

The guns I saw that were submitted are nonsense.
That is not the guns they use to terrorize Ogoniland.
And I asked that if the state government needs
One to say something, I don't play pranks.
Let them be sincere ... (Solomon Ndigbara 2017)

To him, offering amnesty to Ogoni cultist and criminal gangs is a welcome development, but the amnesty exercise is doomed to fail because the quality and quantity of arms submitted in public are far cries from the actual weapons they use. He expressed his willingness to work with the security agents to mop out arms from Ogoni if only they will be sincere. He added;

In sincere surrendering of arms, all those involved
if he is regarded as a 'godfather' he must take
an oath before the submission of arms
(Solomon Ndigbara 2017) as reported by (Okafor April 3rd, 2017).

If truly the Ogoni leaders want peace to be restored in Ogoni land, hence, the need for the reconsidering of the Ogoni indigenous oath taking in curbing societal vicissitude, as oath taking remains the only institution that cannot be easily influenced.

Way Forward

Having examined the roles oath-taking plays in the past and present in the Ogoni indigenous society, it is therefore clear that there is no need for the Ogoni people to abandon their indigenous values for alien cultures, thus, oath-taking should be seen as serving both religious and cultural purposes in providing social control and spiritual health to the local communities, during crises moments, when justice needs to be done and is seen to be done. Therefore, while not adopting the negative approach and administering oath-taking, oath-taking should be preserved and mingled with modern concepts thereby

maintaining the people's distinctiveness. The Ogoni chiefs and leaders, *KAGOTE* and *MOSOP* should step up in consideration of the institution of the indigenous oath-taking in curbing the Ogoni societal vicissitude that is seen as attractive trends in the contemporary Ogoni society.

The Nigerian Government at all levels should recognize and institute the indigenous oath-taking in the Nigerian constitution as the only option for the oath of office, to achieve the anti-corruption war by the federal government, if truly they are ready and sincere to fight corruption. Besides, the repentant criminals and cult groups during the Rivers State Amnesty Programme should be given the indigenous oath for a sincere and total rediscovering of a peaceful Rivers State.

CONCLUSION

From our discussion so far, it is clear that the Ogoni indigenous oath-taking does not only help in maintaining harmony among aggrieved parties but also serves as an instrument of social stability. The belief in the ability of the gods in giving impartial judgment has been the bedrock of oath-taking, and the reestablishment of truthful statements, maintenance of good human relations and the preservation of institutional secrets are the major reasons for oath-taking in the Ogoni indigenous society.

Oath-taking, therefore, amplifies the sacredness of the divine order, as various prohibitive rules guide the people against acts considered harmful to their well being as individuals and society in general. It as well guides the people on the do's and don'ts of the society as such principles and moral codes are believed to be willed to them by the gods of the land. Hence, misfortune or death befalls anyone who violates the stipulations of the oath, or who swears falsely in order to deceive. To avoid cheating, stealing, murder, lying, adultery, explications and to confirm the veracity of a person's claim, people take to swearing to an oath. This is because such social vices threaten the social fabric of the society. Therefore, reconsidering the indigenous oath-taking is a better step beyond amnesty in curbing societal vicissitude.

Endnotes

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