

Oil Extraction, Dispossession, Resistance and Conflict in Nigeria's Oil-Rich Niger Delta

(Draft: comments are welcome)

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Introduction:

Hardly a day passes without news about violent acts from the Niger Delta appearing on the headlines of local and international newspapers, or news broadcast media. Such reports vividly document incidents of violence—clashes between rival armed groups, and between militias and government troops, killings, sabotage of oil pipelines and installations, and a thriving transnational trade in stolen oil (or illegal oil bunkering), and small arms. Also of note are the kidnapping and ransoming of foreign and local oil workers and some prominent individuals, and well-publicized threats issued by militia groups against oil companies and the State. By 2008, such attacks against oil installations had forced the shutting in of estimated 25 to 40 percent of Nigerian's oil production and exports leading to the substantial loss of revenues and profits to the State-Oil Transnational's alliance. Thus, from a daily oil production of 2.5 million barrels of oil in 2005, by late 2008 the figure had dropped to about 1.9 to 2.1 million barrels as a result in the disruption to production and supply.

The subject of the violence and insecurity in this oil-rich region has continued to occupy the attention of strategic, security and policy analysts, and to the multinationals dominated oil industry, whose multi-billion dollar investments as well as oil-dependent home economies are placed at great risk by the crises in the Niger Delta. In the same way, local and international human rights organizations and political analysts have been pre-occupied with the region, turning out many reports and papers about the struggles in the region, and how these can be resolved.

This paper critically examines the relationship between the escalating violence involving armed groups and local militia protesting or riding on the groundswell of popular discontent and alienation linked to the exploitation of the oil resources of Nigeria's oil-rich, but paradoxically impoverished Niger Delta region of Nigeria. These violent conflicts escalated

from 2006 as a result of several factors. Central to these is the growing contestation over the control of the natural resources, particularly oil and gas, between the minority ethnic groups of the Niger Delta and the Nigerian state-Oil Multinationals partnership.

Yet, these conflicts are complex and harbour layered contradictions within the various forces, which also reflect both transnational-local enmeshment and struggle. Thus, while at certain levels, it is possible to glean a pan-Delta solidarity in terms of articulating the demand for 'resource control', to win back the control of resources from their expropriators, there is also ample evidence of intra, and inter ethnic minority ethnic rivalry and conflict, as well as intra-elite struggles for power and resources. This suggests that the complex dimensions of the conflict need to be systematically 'unpacked.'

Attention is therefore focused on the politics through which local groups organize resistance against a transnational oil alliance comprising the Oil Multinationals, backed by their home governments, the Nigerian state and the elite coalitions built within its structure of power, of which a small but significant faction is of Niger Delta origin. It also shows how local groups connect to, and network with global groups/organizations to 'transnationalize' their resistance to the alienating and exploitative aspects of globalized oil production. The basic assumption that flows through the local discourse of resistance is that oil extraction has been synonymous with dispossession. This view can be gleaned from the Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People's (MOSOP) Ogoni Bill of Rights and the Ijaw Youth Congress' (IYC) Kaiama Declaration—both charters of demands by the Ogoni and Ijaw ethnic groups of the Niger Delta to reclaim control and ownership of the resources produced from their land and waters for their own development. In is this quest to reclaim control of oil, which has in part pitched these groups against a powerful and entrenched transnational oil partnership that is intent of crushing any obstacles to the uninterrupted extraction and flow of the precious crude.

In the current phase of the resistance struggle against globalized oil extraction, the metamorphoses of the protest politics into a growing insurgency has been represented by the appearance of the Movement for the emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) in 2006. This, along with the appearance of Asian State Oil Companies has contributed to the strategic re-framing of the region in terms of the post-9/11 global energy security

calculations and the 'new scramble' for Africa's oil. The emerging scenario raises new questions about the nature of the transnational dynamics of extraction, dispossession and resistance, and what it portends for the people of the region, both in the short and the long term.

In setting about its task, this paper is divided into four broad sections. The introduction sets the background to the critical issues. It is followed by a conceptual section that critically treats the issues around extraction, dispossession and resistance and connects them to the logic of globalization and its 'discontents' in the context of the Niger Delta. The third and analytical section provides critical examination of the issues involved in the politics of local resistance against the state-transnational oil alliance, while the fourth and concluding section sums up the arguments and the prospects for the future.

Extraction and Dispossession: Conceptual Issues:

Oil extraction involves the finding and removal of hydrocarbons by drilling deep into the earth. It is a key part of the transformation (production) of a natural resource: oil and gas into energy fuels. This involves complex processes linking the upstream and downstream operations. While the upstream operations involve the search for, discovery and production of oil and gas, the downstream operations include: the refining, processing, distribution and sale of petroleum products largely, fuels, lubricants, gas and petrochemicals. Thus, oil production is fundamentally about the commodification of an energy resource sold at the market, for profit. Given its nature as the most commercially viable form of energy presently, oil is considered a lynchpin of capitalism on a global scale. Beyond this, it is the fuel of strategic and military power involving high stakes in guaranteeing uninterrupted supplies or what has become the securitization (and militarization) of the sources of supply across the world.

Of immediate interest in this paper is the social relations of power that is spawned around oil extraction. Oil-based extraction and accumulation is inextricably tied to a combustible mix of exploitation, violence and the large-scale removal and transfer of energy resources and wealth from the site of production to those of consumption, accumulation and distribution. This inevitably leads to the commodification of oil on the one hand, and the dispossession of those from under whose lands and waters the oil is extracted.

While it is argued that oil producing states are paid in the form of taxes, royalties and profit-sharing arrangement with oil companies, there is some evidence to support the view that the greater integration of Nigeria's oil industry into the global capitalist energy economy has generated "not wealth, but the outflow of wealth" (Bond 2006) from the oil producing Niger Delta. This position is brought out in sharp relief by Watts (2006), who notes that "in the oil rich states of Bayelsa and Delta there is one doctor for every 150,000 inhabitants. Oil has wrought only poverty, state violence, and a dying ecosystem."

It is important to note that accumulation by dispossession operates in complex ways. Though transnational, it involves various layers and meshes, which bring together various forces and actors at different scales and levels. What is however clear, is that while the Niger Delta yields oil and gas worth billions of dollars annually, the region has remained one of the most underdeveloped parts of the country, while transnational corporations and elites (including Nigerian elites) have accumulated vast amounts of wealth from the oil business. Critical to this arrangement of transnational exploitation are the Transnational Oil Corporations that are 'locked' into a partnership with the Nigerian state.

Extraction and Dispossession: Outlining the anatomy

The structure of extraction and dispossession in the Niger Delta is embedded in the transnational political economy of oil. According to Watts (2004: 60), it operates through an "oil complex" comprising: 'a statutory monopoly over mineral exploitation, a nationalized oil company (NNPC) that operates through joint ventures with oil majors who are granted territorial concessions, the security apparatuses of the state protecting costly investments and ensuring the continual flow of oil, and an institutional mechanism 'derivation principle' by which federal oil revenues are distributed to the states and producing communities, and not least the oil producing communities themselves.'

Watts goes on to note that "central to the oil complex is its enclave character, the extent to which it is militarized as a national security sector, and a dominant fiscal sociology, namely the massive centralizing consequences of vast unearned income, flowing to the federal exchequer, derivative of the alliance of state and capital." The result is that the Nigerian state acts transnationally to facilitate oil extraction, with the power elite using state power to accumulate oil wealth, using such a 'privatized' state to militarize extraction by crushing

protest and resistance to oil exploitation, while using oil wealth to reinforce control over power, and continued participation in transnational accumulation.

The Transnational Connection

A report citing the Chairman of the policy sub-committee of the Oil and Gas Sector Reform Implementation Committee (OGIC), notes that Multinational oil corporations account for over 95 per cent of Nigeria's oil and gas production "carried out under various schemes as joint ventures, production sharing contracts" (Awhotu, 2008). The oil and gas is extracted mainly from the Niger Delta. Oil multinationals are bound to the Nigerian state through contracts that underpin the transnational nature of extraction and the sharing of the profits. The point of 'unity' is the common interest in extraction and profit through globalized oil extraction and trade.

It is therefore not difficult to fathom the contribution of oil and gas taken from the Niger Delta to the record profit being announced by Oil Multinationals. Exxon Mobil—the world's largest oil company announced record profits for 2007 approximating \$40.6 billion, with the total company sales put at more than \$404 billion, exceeding "the gross domestic product of 120 countries" (Mouward 2008). The same scenario holds true for Royal Dutch Shell which operates in over 110 countries and made \$27.56 billion in profits in 2007, and Chevron Texaco that announced record profits of \$18.7 billion in 2007 (BBC 2008a; Porretto 2008). While it has been difficult to come by the exact figures of the 'contribution' of the Niger Delta to these record profits, it cannot be denied that its oil contributed to the mega-profits.

Since the extraction of oil from Nigeria spans five decades, it means that extraction and accumulation has yielded a lot to Oil Multinationals and the state. There are two points that should be noted. In the first phase of the Nigerian oil industry that preceded the second phase of 'resource nationalism' or 'indigenization in the 1970's, MNOC's held sway over the industry. In the second phase, government assumed ownership of the industry but institutionalized its partnership with foreign oil capital through, joint oil venture agreements and production and risk sharing contracts. So, although government controls access, and gets a larger share of oil profits, MNOC's control production and have considerable leverage over costs, of which government has little or no capacity to monitor or regulate, and has to bear the larger burden. It is within this complex anatomy of burden and profit sharing that MNOC's make profits.

The Nigerian state:

The role of the Nigerian state in the oil industry is embedded in the history of the Nigerian state (Obi 2001: 25). It took the form of colonial and post-colonial laws that vested the ownership of oil in the state: colonial and post-colonial. However the emphasis in this paper will be on the post-colonial era particularly the Military Decree's that vested the ownership of oil and gas in the Nigerian state. Of note in this regard, are three legislations: the Petroleum Act of 1969, Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) Decree of 1978, and the Land Use Act of 1978.

The Petroleum Act/Decree No. 51 of 1969 basically updated earlier Mineral and Oil Acts. Section 1 of the Military Decree provided that "the entire ownership and control of all petroleum in, under or upon any lands to which this section shall be vested in the state". Section 2 also granted the Oil Minister the sole right to grant oil mining leases to oil companies (Obi 2001: 26). In this way, the oil producing communities of the Niger Delta had no legal claim to the 'ownership' oil produced from under their lands and waters.

In the same regard, the EEZ Decree further alienated the people from the oil wealth produced from their land. Ebeku (2001) argues that the Decree has been integrated into the 1999 Nigerian Constitution section 44 (3) to provide that "the entire property in and control of all minerals, mineral oils and natural gas in, under or upon any land in Nigeria or in, under or upon the territorial waters and Exclusive Economic Zone of Nigeria shall vest in the government of the federation and shall be managed in such a manner as may be prescribed by the National Assembly.

The Land Use Act of 1978 basically tried to unify the various land tenure systems in Nigeria, and place all land in the federation in the trust of the state governments (Obi 2001: 26). The impact of this law on the oil-rich Niger Delta was serious. As I noted elsewhere, "the manner of the expropriation of their land left a lot to be desired. The people were neither consulted, nor was their approval sought". Also, "having lost the ownership of their land to the government, the most the oil communities could claim from oil multinationals was compensation or "surface rents" (Obi 2001: 27). Ebeku (2001) also notes that the Land Use Act (LUA) had an unjust impact on the people of the Niger Delta: Loss of power of traditional authorities and the loss of right to compensation. Summing up the situation, Ebeku observes that "the Niger Delta People see the impact of the LUA on them as bordering on expropriation and injustice. It would appear that they are not rid of their conviction that oil belongs to them, being traditionally part of their land. Hence they are struggling for justice: to regain possession of their 'seized' property; to end the despoliation of their environment by reckless oil operations".

Perhaps the most contentious role of the Nigerian state relates to the sharing of oil revenues. At its heart is the feeling that oil wealth from the Niger Delta has been used largely for developing other parts of the country or taken abroad, while the “goose that lays the golden eggs” has been neglected and underdeveloped. This is based on the policy shifts in the allocative principle that national revenues should be shared on the principle that resources should be returned to the site of their generation on the basis of the ratio of their contribution to the national purse. The argument is when regions that cohered with ethnic majority groups produced the bulk of national revenues they enjoyed the derivation principle which ensured that they retained the bulk of the wealth generated within their regions. Since the end of the civil war in 1970 when the bulk of revenues came from oil from the ethnic minority region of the Niger Delta, derivation was increasingly reduced from 50 per cent to three in the 1980’s and only increased to 13 per cent in 2001. The domination of the oil wealth produced from the region by non-Deltans has also fuelled resentment and anger amid claims that the oil of the region is being stolen by other groups, leaving the source of the wealth to wallow in paradoxical poverty (Ebeku 2008: 400-403).

This section will be incomplete without some mention of the amount of oil wealth generated from the Niger Delta. According to some estimates, the region generated about \$500 billion in the past 50 years to Nigeria. The Niger Delta Human Development Report (2006), which notes that, the “analysis of poverty and human development paint a dismal picture” (UNDP 2006: 15) provides a sharp contrast between the amount of wealth generated from the region and its state of underdevelopment. Its findings include ‘low value of Human Development Index (HDI) of 0.564, poor quality and accessibility of basic health care services’, and ‘inadequate unavailable and poor quality infrastructure’, high unemployment rates (UNDP 2006: 15, 18, 44), an ‘unstable social, economic and political situation’ that ‘has helped open the door to HIV&AIDS’, and high levels of poverty, estimated at an average of 69 per cent (2006: 17, 57-58).

Apart from the argument that the federal government and the elite have largely used the oil proceeds largely for corrupt enrichment/ primitive accumulation, one level that is often missed out is the amount of corruption and primitive accumulation that takes place by the political elite within the Niger Delta. So far, two of the former Niger Delta state governors have been successfully prosecuted for corruption in Nigeria, while a third, is wanted abroad, with his associates standing trial in Britain on corruption-related charges.

What flows from the foregoing, is that extraction and dispossession of the Niger Delta is a multi-layered process. When the millions of barrels of oil that is stolen annually through illegal oil bunkering by powerful transnational oil networks acting in concert with members of the Nigerian

elite and criminal gangs (Coventry Cathedral 2009: 150-165; Legaloil 2007) is added to the overall picture, the magnitude of the expropriation of the region comes out in bold relief. The result is the alienation and embitterment of the people at the receiving end, who bear the costs of the expropriation, pollution and violence attendant to oil-based transnational accumulation in the Niger Delta.

Resistance Politics in the Niger Delta

Background

The Niger Delta is no stranger to resistance politics. Integrated into the Trans Atlantic global trade in the fifteenth century, the region resisted the early attempts of European traders to gain access to the interior where the goods traded at the Atlantic coast were sourced. It was this that eventually led to clashes between some Niger Delta potentates and European traders/consuls in the late nineteenth century (Obi 2003: 196-203). At stake at that time was the control of trade and the sovereignty of these Niger Delta city states and kingdoms. Thus, such places as Bonny, Brass, Opobo, the Benin Kingdom, and the City States along the Benin River, were forcibly conquered and placed under the Niger Coast protectorate by British colonizers to protect mercantile and imperial interests. Thus, in terms of its origin, the struggle for self-determination by the people of the region was a reaction to external Trans Atlantic forces and interests that attempted to subordinate the region to the demands of global economic system and the colonial state.

From Local Protest to Resistance

However, Nigeria's independence in 1960 only changed the character of the struggle for self-determination. This time the people of the Niger Delta region, who were ethnic minorities, in two of the three regions of a federation dominated by three numerically large(r) ethnic groups, sought to have autonomous regions of their own to prevent their marginalization and neglect by the larger groups.

The earliest violent attempt after independence to take forcibly assert autonomy and seize power over oil took place in February 1966, when an ethnic minority Ijaw militant, ex-policeman and undergraduate Isaac Adaka Boro, led a group named the Niger Delta Volunteer Force (NDVF) in an abortive attempt to secede from Nigeria, and establish a Niger

Delta republic. At stake then, as now, was self-determination, and the ownership and control of the oil in the region, which Boro and his supporters feared would be seized by the (Igbo ethnic majority-dominated) Eastern region government, and the new “unitarist” Nigerian military government, led by General J.T.U. Aguiyi-Ironsi, an Igbo officer (Obi 2001: 21). Initially sentenced to death after being found guilty of treason by a court, Boro and his followers were freed, after another military coup led by military officers of northern origin resulted in Ironsi’s overthrow and death, and his replacement with Colonel Yakubu Gowon as the new head of state. Upon his release, Boro joined the Nigerian Army and fought in the civil war on the federal side, apparently to defend the oilfields of the Niger Delta from falling into the hands of the rebel Biafran (Igbo) forces. Boro died in the war front shortly before the Nigerian civil war ended in 1970. His bravery and exploits in furthering the cause of Ijaw freedom made him a hero in the eyes of the people, and was to be revived in the 1990’s by Niger Delta militants struggling for local autonomy and resource control.

Several developments after the war ended had implications for the struggle of the ethnic minorities. These included the increased transfer and centralization of the control of oil revenues from the regions to the federal military government, the OPEC-led oil-boom of the 1970’s, the transfer of the ownership of oil-rich land from local communities to the federal (and state) governments, and the vast expansion in local oil production and its impact on the fragile Niger Delta environment. This provided a background for agitation by the ethnic minorities that felt that the federal military government had short-changed them, after they supported it during the civil war, only for them to lose access to a considerable proportion of the oil produced from their region. Rather than having a right to 50 per cent of oil revenues on the basis of the derivation principle of revenue allocation, it was progressively reduced till it got to a mere 3 per cent in the early 1980’s. In its place, population size and need were used, giving the greater share of oil to the non-oil producing ethnic majority groups from other parts of the country, who also were seen as occupying the most lucrative political offices as well as high positions in the Nigerian oil industry. By the late-1970, various ethnic minority identity and elite groups had begun to mobilize support for a peaceful protest against the activities of oil companies and neglect by the government. These took the form of petitions, reports and articles in local newspapers.

These struggles eventually culminated in the creation of such states by the federal military government under General Gowon in 1967, but by that time the ‘complicating’ element of oil—largely found and produced from the Niger Delta came fully into the picture. Central to this was the decision of the federal government through the 1969 Petroleum Act to centralize power over oil ownership, and the distribution of oil revenues, effectively taking this power out of the hands of the states of the Niger Delta, leading to another round of struggles directed at regaining control over a larger share of oil revenues.

This ‘transfer’ of power over oil from the regional base to a federal centre was further reinforced by several laws including the 1978 Land Use Act. These laws were interpreted by the ethnic minorities as the pretext by the larger and dominant groups that controlled the federal government to dispossess them of their oil wealth in the name of national unity and federal balance. Since the mid-1980s, particularly after crises in the global oil market affected Nigeria’s economic fortunes, and the country adopted structural adjustment with rather harsh social consequences, the struggles in the Niger Delta intensified, and were simultaneously waged at several levels: local, national and global.

Current Dynamics of Resistance Politics and Conflict

The militarization of oil extraction has percolated throughout Niger Delta society, resulting in a parallel political economy of violence, which is specifically articulated in the spheres of the struggles for power and resources at all levels and stages of the production, accumulation and distribution systems. The face of this violence is the pervasive presence of military troops, private security and ‘non-state’ violent actors such as militias, armed groups and gangs the region. Although, the region has had a long history of resistance and struggle for self-determination, its most recent phase since 2005 has been remarkably militarized.

Local resistance in the Niger Delta as a site of globalized oil production is complex, ambiguous and even contradictory. It reflects various strands and tendencies engaged in the push and pull between and within local forces, elites and the Nigerian petro-state. In its present ‘phase,’ local resistance in the Niger Delta refers to “a collective action directed at blocking further alienation, expropriation and environmental degradation. It represents a mass project of restitution and self-determination” arising from the exploitation of the

region's oil by MNOCs backed by the Nigerian state (Obi 2005: 318). The politics of local resistance has been couched in the rhetoric of "resource control": the demand for local autonomy (within a restructured and decentralized Nigerian federal state) and control of the natural resources of the Niger Delta by the indigenes/ethnic minorities of the states and communities in the region. This has pitched the people of the region against the Nigerian federal state that took over control of oil and oil revenues during the Nigerian civil war (1967-1970) and the MNOCs that exploit the oil in the region in partnership with the state.

From a transnational perspective, resistance politics has become the refuge for those who are alienated by capitalist social relations and the hegemonic power of the federal government-corporate alliance over oil, and seek to oppose their exploitative agenda. Depending on the specificities of each moment, the balance of social forces and the organizational capacity of local social movements, these movements seek forcefully to rectify the inequities embedded in the imperatives of global accumulation. It is important to note Gramsci's argument on the "ambiguity of resistance" (Mittleman and Chin, 2005: 17-27) in seeking to fully understand the complexities and fluid dynamics of the politics on resistance.

This much can be gleaned from the ambiguities that have characterized the struggles in the Niger Delta from the Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP) in the 1990's, the shifts that have taken place in the various armed groups operating in the Niger Delta and the on-going armed resistance by the pan-Delta alliance—Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) (Obi 2008: 417-434). It is also noted that the resistance though with its 'epicentre' in the swamps and creeks of the oil-rich region, is by no means limited to it. What we are able to glean is the embeddedness of the other levels is what can be aptly termed a 'geographical re-scaling', with various flows interacting and colliding in a complex tangle that has to be systematically unpacked.

As noted earlier, MOSOP moved the struggle to its next phase in the 1990's after its demands as articulated in the Ogoni Bill of Rights which, among others demanded "political autonomy" including "the right to the control and use of a fair proportion of Ogoni economic

resources for Ogoni development” was ignored by the federal government. MOSOP pressed ahead by linking up with transnational rights advocacy networks to globalize its ‘local’ resistance, and increasing its pressure on the government and Shell, the largest onshore oil multinational operator in the Niger Delta. MOSOP’s spokespersons showed how Ogoni’s resources were being tapped by the State-oil alliance, pointing also the pollution and degradation of the environment as threatening the existence of the Ogoni.

The MOSOP campaign against Shell became well known and effective internationally, before its “revolution” was literally beheaded in November 1995 largely through the use of state military force. Although, the fate that befell MOSOP was to send a signal to other ethnic minority groups that the government would not brook any challenge to its control of oil, Ijaw youth took up the struggle from 1997 onwards. In December 1998, the Ijaw Youth Council (IYC) was formed, and it issued the Kaiama Declaration (KD), which among demands, insisted that “we cease to recognise all undemocratic decrees that rob our peoples/communities of the right to ownership and control of our lives and resources, which were enacted without our participation and consent” and demanded the “Ijaw control of Ijaw oil.”

To show that it meant business, the IYC declared *Operation Climate Change* in which it demanded that all oil companies should leave the Niger Delta before the end of December 1998. Like MOSOP, the IYC mobilized the youth and ordinary people, by drawing upon local Ijaw idioms and culture of resistance. Part of this included the use of *Egbesu*: literally the Ijaw god of war, but whose real significance lay deep in Ijaw cosmology as a symbol of spiritual protection (invincibility) for the Ijaw, when fighting a ‘just war’ for liberation. Rather than respond to the demands of the KD, or seek to enter into dialogue with the IYC on the need to negotiate a withdrawal of the Operation Climate Change, the military government sent in troops that forcefully put down the uprising against transnational oil. Many protesters were injured in the repression that followed, while Boro’s birthplace, which was perceived as a rallying point for IYC activists was sacked by the army. A search then followed for IYC activists, believed to have the tattoo of *Egbesu* on their bodies. This formed the background to Nigeria’s return from military to democratic rule in May 1999.

As noted earlier, expectations were initially high in the Niger Delta that the return to democracy would lead to the de-militarization of the region, reduce tensions, and bring “democracy dividends” to the people. At the same time, the local political class had gone round in an attempt to co-opt the leadership of the various social movements, identity and communal organizations, with a view to de-radicalizing and demobilizing them or using them for narrow/personal political purposes.

After the 1999 elections, the security forces remained in the Niger Delta, but assumed a rather low profile. However, when a criminal gang that had held an oil producing community captive killed some police officers, and before the expiration of an ultimatum given to the Bayelsa state government by the federal government, the Nigerian Army invaded the community ostensibly to apprehend the criminals, but it later took the form of a punitive expedition, which razed the entire community save for a few buildings, and left thousands injured, homeless or dead. After Odi, military forces also raided other communities in the Niger Delta such as Olugbobiri, Liama and Gbarantoru (Human Rights Watch 2002).

The continued militarization of the region, contributed to the feeling in some circles that those that had held the oil-rich enclave would neither listen to the demands of the people nor respect their rights. Such views were informed by the apparent “failure” of peaceful protest to effect change in the attitude of the state-oil alliance toward the Niger Delta. The response by such groups was to adopt violence, either in navigating the complex terrain of survival in the region, or in resisting what is seen as the predatory instincts of the state-oil alliance and wrest the control of oil from them. This is both an expression of frustration as the failure of peaceful protest to lead to any meaningful change in the plight of the people, and anger at the impunity with which the region is being plundered by the state-oil alliance, with the complicity of some local elites and “violent youth”.

The violence of resource extraction in the Niger Delta by the state-oil alliance has dialectically resulted in the violent resistance. However, it must be noted that the very nature of such dialectics is complex, and sometimes ambivalent or contradictory, as the various forces find expression at different levels, and alliances are built, destroyed and

reconstituted in various ways. This creates space for political expediency or opportunism both of the part of the various groups and their sponsors. For example, three state governors in the Niger Delta in 1999 were able to penetrate and sponsor some of the militia's armed groups in the region to unleash violence upon and intimidate their political opponents and voters. Of note was the case of the governor of Rivers state, who got two of the leaders of such groups, one, Mujaheed Asari Dokubo—then Vice President and later (with the governor's support), President of the IYC and the other, Ateke Tom, then leader of the Okrika Vigilante (later Niger Delta Vigilante), to “help” him during the 1999 and 2003 elections (Best and Kemedi 2005; Manby 2004). However, after winning power, the politicians walked away from these armed groups, who as some suggest turned their guns to other uses, mainly towards the illegal oil trade, or gang wars. Asari and Ateke were believed to have turned their attention to the transnational illegal oil bunkering networks, collecting tolls on the trade, providing security to oil bunkering crews, selling stolen oil, or operating illegal oil refineries whose products were sold below market prices.

By involving themselves in illegal oil bunkering, some militias and armed groups gained access to funds with which they stockpiled sophisticated weapons, built camps, recruited and trained fighters. They also gained autonomy from their erstwhile political patrons, giving them space to pursue alternative agendas. Of note in this regard was Asari Dokubo who in 2003 broke off his association with Governor Odili, who he accused of “rigging the 2003 elections in Rivers state”, and formed the Niger Delta Peoples Volunteer Force (NDPVF), ostensibly to fight for Ijaw rights (Manby 2004). A year later bloody conflict ensued between Asari and Ateke's forces, with the latter believed to be backed by the state seeking to destroy Asari's influence, particularly after he adopted populist rhetoric in promoting his credentials as a defender of Ijaw and ethnic minority rights. Shortly after he and Ateke signed a peace agreement in Abuja in October 2004

Now estranged from the politicians and the military that have declared him a wanted person, Ateke has been accused of attacking police stations in Port Harcourt just before the Presidential elections in April 2007, destroying the stations and killing some officers in the

process. In response, Ateke noted, “I am a Niger Delta Freedom fighter” (Simmons 2007). Apart from these two groups, there has been a proliferation of other armed groups and “cults” in the oil-rich region (Coventry Cathedral 2009: 109-131).

It is also believed that the governors of two other Niger Delta states: Bayelsa and Delta, had links with some of the local militias in their domains. Their presence was pronounced during the conflict over the oil city of Warri, in the western Delta shortly before the 2003 elections, increased activities before and during elections in other parts of the Delta, as well as the activities of violent gangs paid by oil companies to protect oil pipes and installations or fight against community associations/individuals disturbing oil operations. For now, the most potent militant group engaging in local resistance, but targeting a global audience is the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND).

MEND: The Militarization of Resistance?

MEND is believed to have been formed in January 11, 2006 (Coventry Cathedral 2009: 123). On that date, it attacked the EA oil field off the coast of the Niger Delta abducting four oil workers that were held for nineteen days (Obi 2008: 60). It had its roots in a loose coalition including the Federated Niger Delta Ijaw Communities (FNDIC), The Niger Delta Peoples Volunteer Force (NDPVF) and other armed groups from Delta, Bayelsa and Rivers states (Ukiwo 2007; Okonta 2007; Coventry Cathedral 2009: 123-124). It decided to strike again shortly after the February 2006 attack by the federal military on Okerenkoko in the Ijaw clan of the Western Delta ostensibly to put an end to the activities of illegal oil bunkerers. This time, MEND fighters attacked “Shell’s flow stations, pipelines and the Forcados oil tanker platform, leading to a significant reduction in Nigeria’s oil production” (Obi 2008: 61).

Since then, group has attracted international attention to the plight of the Ijaw and its resistance campaign through the taking hostage of foreign oil workers, demonstrating the inability of Nigerian security forces to stop its attacks and sabotage of oil installations and the effective use of the global news media. Using the internet to send emails and images to the world’s leading news agencies and local newspapers, taking journalists to its camps in the swamps of the Niger Delta (Junger 2007), MEND has tried to distance itself from the

local political class and the ransoming of foreign hostages, and tapping into local idioms, symbols and grievances to embed itself in the people's consciousness. It has however gained most attention by its threats to "cripple Nigerian oil exports" (IRIN 2006).

The organization been profiled by the MIPT (2007), as "an active terrorist group that uses violent means to support the rights of the ethnic Ijaw people in the Niger Delta". The report also notes "led by a notoriously shadowy and secretive elite cadre, MEND's ultimate goal is to expel foreign oil companies and Nigerians not indigenous to the Delta region from Ijawland. In the short run, the group wishes to increase local control over the money made from the exploitation of the region's abundant natural resources". While this profile dwells on labeling, rather than analyzing the circumstances within which MEND emerged and the content of its message(s), with a view to constructing the image of an imminent "terrorist threat" to western energy interests, a more nuanced and informed view locates its emergence in "the lethal cocktail of economic deprivation, military dictatorship and worsening environmental crisis" in the Niger Delta, and its tapping into "the fifty year Ijaw quest for social and environmental justice in the Niger Delta" (Okonta 2007: 7-11).

While it has targeted foreign oil workers, it has released all such hostages after a period, all unharmed, giving credence to the view that they are used to draw international attention to the injustice in the region, seen as an important aspect in globalising local resistance in the Niger Delta. In an interview with Brian Ross (2007), Jomo Gbomo, the spokesperson of MEND, elucidated on the objectives of the group:

The Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) is an amalgam of all arm bearing groups in the Niger Delta fighting for the control of oil revenue by indigenes of the Niger Delta who have had relatively no benefits from the exploitation of our mineral resources by the Nigerian government and oil companies over the last fifty years.

It appears that MEND's anger is directed at the government and the oil multinationals, which, it holds responsible for the plunder and pollution of the Niger Delta. Although the militant group has recently been affected by factionalism following three developments: the release of Asari Dokubo, leader of the NDPVF from prison in 2007, and the election of

Jonathan Goodluck as Nigeria's Vice President in 2007 and the arrest in Angola in September of the same year, deportation and trial in Nigeria in 2008 of one of MEND's leaders Henry Okah. In spite of his arrest the core of MEND has remained steadfast to its goals of controlling the oil in the Niger Delta so that the benefits that accrue from oil revenues can flow to the people. Thus, the pro-Okah faction of MEND has made his release a condition for a 'ceasefire', and continued its attacks of oil installations in the region, thereby putting more pressure on the already tight global oil market.

What is to be noted also is that MEND reflects a mix of several tendencies—ranging from radical resistance, to ambivalence towards the Niger Delta elite, and some opportunism. It goes back to the earlier point that resistance politics in the Niger Delta operate in rather ambiguous ways, in which former allies part ways, enemies become collaborators, and the quest for resources to wage the struggles sometimes blurs the line between waging a struggle for a just cause and engaging in criminal acts for self-aggrandizement.

The Global Securitization of Resistance in the Niger Delta

The response from the Nigerian state-transnational oil alliance has been the militarization and securitization of the Niger Delta. Three major considerations have been relevant to this. First is the penchant of the State to dismiss MEND as a bunch of "criminals." Second is the post-9/11 global war on terror that has provided the context for the 'labeling' of MEND as a terrorist organization with possible links to other transnational terrorist organizations targeting Western oil interests (Pham 2007). The third relates to the risks to US interests against the background of the increased strategic profile of West Africa's in global energy security calculations as an 'alternative' to the volatile Arabian and Persian Gulf (Ilanaccone 2007; Marquardt 2006; Ploch 2008), as well as a site of increased global competition for hydrocarbons in the face of surging demand and limited supplies. Also of note is the perceived threat (often exaggerated) posed to Western oil interests and influence by the entry of Chinese and Indian state oil capital into the oil fields in the Gulf of Guinea (Obi 2008; Lubeck, Watts and Lipschutz 2007).

In this regard, the transnational oil alliance has increasingly privileged the security dimension to the extraction of energy resources from the Niger Delta, with resistance politics now seen as a threat that has to be removed. It is in this context that the recent offer of military

assistance to the Nigerian government to 'restore law and order' in the Niger Delta by the British Prime Minister (BBC, 2008b) can be understood. In the same regard, the newly formed US Africa Command has as part of its mandate, the curtailment of threats to US interests on the continent, as well as building the capacity of African governments to ensure security and order in their territories. On all scores the stakes in the continued extraction of oil and the dispossession of the Niger Delta people continue to climb higher, while the politics of resistance, ever so keen to contest the expropriation of the oil-rich region and win back control from the transnational alliance remains resolute that it cannot remain business-as-usual as what is at stake is the very survival of the people, the fragile ecosystem and their future.

Conclusion:

This paper shows that oil extraction, oil pollution, and dispossession of the people of the Niger Delta dialectically feeds into resistance and conflict in the oil-rich region. Just as the global demand for oil continues to rise, and global access to oil has become of foremost strategic interest in a post-9/11 world the stakes in ensuring uninterrupted supply of oil from the restive region have become even higher.

What has been witnessed in the last three years is the escalation of resistance into a full-blown insurgency, and the ambivalent response of a Nigerian state intent to preserve the dominant relations of power over oil—backed by Global Oil and hegemonic powers that seek to securitize the problem in the region in order to justify and legitimize a transnationally backed military solution wrapped by the gloved fist of the Nigerian state.

Yet, there are the skeptics on both sides: the global, concerned that the Nigerian state is held captive by corrupt ruling elites and 'failing' and cannot really deliver on forcibly mediating the crisis; and the local, that is suspicious that the state will not change from its old ways of holding the oil wealth of the region hostage to the exploitative designs of dominant elites and their foreign partners, that feed fat on the oil riches of the region. Yet, there are also those that appear to be sure that the militants in the Niger Delta are criminals or terrorists than can either be crushed by military means, or reined in through the offer of carrots. At the core of this view is the concern that the balance of power that has historically been in favour of the state-transnational alliance should remain the same to guarantee the

conditions for optimal exploitation and accumulation. Yet, the demands of those in the Niger Delta agitating for resource control and self-determination strike at the heart of the power structure of transnational oil extraction and dispossession. Their demands seek to overturn the structure of power and plunder.

What is therefore at stake in reality is the quest of the Niger Delta people for social justice, redress and a redistribution of oil revenues in ways that guarantee 'resource control' to them, and goes to the heart of, and challenges the centralized hegemonic version of federalism that emerged from post-civil war Nigeria and decades of military dictatorship. Beyond this, lies the nature of the alliance between an oil-dependent post-civil war Nigerian state and transnational oil capital. The prospects for change—which could create new conditions for a form of oil production beneficial to the majority of the people of the Niger Delta and a democratic society that can guarantee resource control by the people, would ultimately depend on the ability of a visionary and committed leadership backed by a progressive social movement to address the restructuring on the Nigerian federal state as well as reverse the global plunder and pollution of the oil-rich region.

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