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**ON THE MILITARIZATION OF NIGERIA'S
NIGER DELTA:**

The Genesis of Ethnic Militia in Rivers State, Nigeria

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ON THE MILITARIZATION OF NIGERIA'S NIGER DELTA: THE GENESIS OF ETHNIC MILITIA IN RIVERS STATE.

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Introduction

Resurgence of violence in Nigeria's Niger Delta has resulted in economic and humanitarian tragedies. The latest dimension in the conflict dynamics is the emergence of ethnic militias, cult groups, and availability and use of small arms and light weapons which perhaps, has made the Niger Delta the most devastated by State, inter and intra-communal as well as militia conflicts. The phenomenon of ethnic and private militia, availability and use of sophisticated fire arms enabled militant youths inflict severe damage on oil infrastructure there by disrupting oil production. Often times, expectations of imminent disruption of oil supply contribute to fluctuation in oil prices. Strains on oil supply and internal instabilities created by militia insurgency prompted national and international security concerns over the region. The State and the international community led by United States and Britain have reacted to the security challenges by designating Niger Delta as dangerous and insecure place inhabited by criminals, vandals, hostage takers, kidnappers, restive youths, oil thieves and terrorists. This provided the needed cover for militarization of the Niger Delta to intimidate the people of the area particularly the Ijaws to submission. While the Asari-Ateke led insurgency present new and unique insights to the conflict dynamic that can not be ignored, to perceive the crisis as terrorism apart from being erroneous further consolidates the "Slik Alliance" between global capital and the Nigerian State to decimate ethnic minorities that inhabit the region.

Of all the complex dynamics at play in resurgence of militia violence in Rivers State, it has been the disruptions in Nigeria's oil production that has garnered the most international attention, hence declaration of the area as a terrorist enclave. This depiction suffers from improper analysis of forces at play in the violence. Current and increased conflict dynamic is not with terror as such but with the underlying factors that gave rise to it with which it interfaces, like the historical deep seated characteristics of Nigeria's political economy (Watts 1999, 2004; Peterside 2001, Okonta & Douglas 2001, Ukeje 2001a, 2001, and Omeje 2004) and its nascent democratic process. We need to approach the problem dialectically to discover the extent to which Asari and Ateke are consequences of sociological forces at play and how these forces are involved in the struggle for control and creation of autonomous governable space.

To debunk the terrorism claim, I will argue that the root of violence derives from the nature and character of the state and how these intersected with some sociological factors to shape violence. To understand the root and dimensions of violence it is important to outline factors that shape this phenomenon. These include issues of minority rights, resource allocation, law enforcement and security and political contestation constitutive of profound challenges with which Nigeria will need to contend.

Alienation as Root of Militancy

Brutal suppression of the Delta dates back to history. The deportation of King Jaja of Opobo (1887), Nana of Itsekiri (1892), Overnarambe (1897), King Ibanichuka of Okrika (1896), and the deposition of king Koko of Brass are cardinal evidence in this regard (Tamuno 1972). Military adventurism derived from establishment, expansion and consolidation of the Southern Nigerian Protectorate between 1900 and 1913 by brute force through protectorate troops and police, who were either directly used in punitive expeditions, patrols, and escorts or maintained as threat against the people of Niger Delta. These forces were notorious for their reign of terror in discharge of their role as part of the executive branch of the colonial State. The bone of contention between the traditional political leadership and the Colonial State was the resolve of the Niger Delta rulers to defend their commercial and political rights which were threatened by the economic activities of the imperial Royal Niger Company (Tamuno 1972).

Isaac Boro in January 1966 led a revolt against the Nigerian state when he proclaimed the Niger Delta Peoples Republic of Nigeria and launched a guerrilla war against the federal government. With one hundred and fifty nine volunteers, Boro established the first ethnic militia in the Niger Delta known as Niger Delta Volunteer Force that engaged the armed forces of Nigeria in a bloody battle. Although Isaac Adaka Boro was defeated by the federal troops, he awakened the jaws for action against oppression and exploitation. In contemporary Nigeria, the crisis revolves around environmental degradation associated with crude oil exploitation by Multi National Oil Companies (MNOCs), and the desire to resolve a sad paradox of having all the oil that oils the wheels of the Nigerian economy, yet looking helpless in the face of ramifying impoverishment. For example, petroleum derived from the Niger Delta accounts for about 50 percent of Nigeria's GDP, 95 percent of foreign exchange earnings, and 80 percent of all budgetary revenues that amounts to almost \$20 billion annually or about \$54 million daily (Ibeanu 2006). Due to a long history of neglect by the State the people experience problems such as poverty, deprivation, non-availability of essential social amenities and services like electricity, hospitals, pipe borne water, quality education and environmental degradation, while billions of dollars generated on their door step go to the State and MNOCs.

As Ibeanu put it:

...available figures show that there is one doctor per 82,000 people, rising to one doctor per 132,000 people in some areas, especially the rural areas, which is more than three times the

national average of 40,000 people per doctor. Only 27 percent of people in the Delta have access to safe drinking water and about 30 percent of household have access to electricity, both of which are below the national averages of 31.7% and 33.6%, respectively....Poverty remains widespread, worsened by an exceptionally high cost of living created by the petro-economy. According to a World Bank study, in the urban areas of Rivers State the cost of living index of 783 is the highest in Nigeria. GNP per capita is below the national average of \$280 and unemployment in Port Harcourt, the premier city of the Delta, is as high as 30 percent. At the same time, access to education, central to remedying some of these social conditions, lags abysmally when compared to other parts of the country. While 76 percent of Nigerian children attend primary school, in the Niger Delta the figure drops appalling to between 30 and 40 percent (2006:3).

Initially the people of the region demonstrated their resentment to the rapacious tendencies of the State, inadequacy of infrastructure, preponderance of unskilled youths, high unemployment and perception of past marginalization through non-violent methods that yielded little fruits. This earliest community protests according to Ukeje (2001:346) involved petitions and sending of community delegations to present complaints to MNOCs and to the State, and occasional demonstrations, boycotts and picketing of government and MNOCs locations. These non-violent methods, he contended evoked out right indignation and hostility.

Having failed to win concessions through peaceful means, the youths have been inexorably excited to militantly protest marginalization, unemployment, inequality, and development deficit. The MNOCs operating joint ventures with the State have been severely hit as vandalization of oil facilities, objection to construction of new facilities, rig blockade, kidnapping of local and international personnel, and shut down of facilities are regularly carried out. State response against these popular pressures assumed the forms of arrest, detention and trial of activists on trump charges and execution the aim being to silence opposition voices, and deployment of military forces that operate more like an army of occupation to demobilize the people. The point of fact is that the State's approach to security is dominated by the character of deterrence exhibited by unrestrained willingness to show maximum force at the slightest hint of insecurity (Douglas 2004). Operation Sweep, Operation Fire-For –Fire, Operation Hacurri No.1 and No. 2, Operation Restore Hope, and operation Flush 1, 2, and 3 are examples of high profile security initiatives that mirror the repressive mood and tendencies of the State. In all cases, the post-colonial security forces like its colonial counter part are designed to facilitate the political and economic aims of the State. Unfortunately, military might dramatically escalated violence as militant groups emerge resorting to the use of arms ostensibly in self-defense provoking bloody clashes with federal troops deployed to contain violence, to drive home their point of deprivation and marginalization.

Although domestication of the Niger Delta to submission is key, it has given rise to formation of armed ethnic militias that now reject the authority and legitimacy of the federal and state government and operate outside the effective control of traditional governance institutions, resist perceived state violence and brutality, and give militant muscle to the demand for resource control. Those that enjoyed government patronage were used to neutralize the more militant and nationalistic groups. It is in this context that emergence and proliferation of ethnic militia groups in Rivers state could be better

understood. Current wave of violence in Rivers State departs fundamentally from previous patterns. Militia leaders and members increasingly display new lethal capacities, and a willingness and skill in using them. As Cesarz et al (2003) put it:

They have brought to the confrontation new assets: rocket-propelled grenades, AK-47s, machine guns, satellite phones, and speedboats. They demonstrated a willingness, and ability, to kill Oil Company and Nigerian military personnel and credibly threaten oil sector infrastructure. Quickly, they proved their dominance of Delta waterways and ability to impede the passage of security agents.

The success of ethnic militias operations derives from better organization, superior equipment, better funds and growing linkages with state political actors and other key stakeholders.

Inter and Intra Ethnic Contests for Oil Benefits

Inter ethnic violence in the Niger Delta is another window to diagnose the genesis of ethnic militia in Rivers state. Part of the problem emanates from creation of states and local government areas with a logic that negates the real interest of ethnic nationalities. Important as states and local government areas may be for development, the creation process is trailed by complaints of unclearly defined and demarcated boundaries a situation productive of inter ethnic conflicts as communities clash over ownership of oil fields, farmlands and waterways (Efemini 2004). In some of these conflicts, the state security forces watch while violence raged especially in cases where intelligence reports indicate that the State's business interests are not threatened. This is not surprising because security in the region is oil and gas driven (Douglas 2004). The reluctance of the State to provide security in perceived non-oil conflict situations created civilian insecurity that in turn stimulated rapid privatization of security. Many communities develop collective responses to insecurity as wealthy and politically influential indigenes invest in procurement of arms to fortify their communities against external attacks. These private policing initiatives however, are often times counter productive as small arms provided for collective security resurfaced in intra community disagreements ultimately exacerbating violence. The Eleme-Okrika incessant boundary disputes provide an insight in to this dimension of the conflict dynamics.

Eleme hosts Nigeria's two refineries, one petro-chemical plant, a fertilizer plant and an ocean terminal. The infrastructure has brought benefits that became a source of envy to her neighbours. Despite Eleme's fundamental economic importance, it had for many years been part of other local government councils. Okrika and its environs like Eleme, are critical to the economic good of the Nigerian State being an oil producing area and home to some of the major oil and gas-related industries. From a history of great culture, proud warriors and influential heritage, its people cut across three local government areas of Rivers State. The site of the refineries has been a cause of disagreement between the two communities. Okrika persistently lays claim to the land hosting some of these facilities a claim that Eleme repeatedly debunked. This led to the first wave of clashes (1980s) in which fighting lasted for several months. During the early years of the conflict, very few arms were available but as violence subsided, claims over

land ownership persisted further polarizing relations and soon fighting erupted between both communities. In 1999 the nature of the hostilities changed radically as the two communities mobilized and armed the youths to prosecute the seeming endless war.

For example, the protracted land dispute on ownership of the land where-in Port Harcourt Refinery Company is located prompted Chiefs and people of Okrika to task each War-Canoe House to nominate two able men for defense of the community (Kalio 2004). It is within this context that a militia group known as Bush Boys emerged among former Okrika combatants who were treated as nationalist by the traditional political leadership. Through this process, small arms become readily available in the communities. After the Okrika/Elemé dispute, the Okrika community maintained the group, which became known as Peace Makers because of the services they rendered. Composition of Peace Makers cut across political parties including non-party members. The Bush Boys later accused those youths who were charged with the responsibility of manning the home front while they were in battle against Elemé of numerous crimes supposedly against the community. Among the accused is Ateke Tom who was driven into exile at Port Harcourt capital of Rivers State as relations between him and the community militia deteriorated. The small arms meant for defence of the community against external aggression became a time bomb of instability as armed youth groups deployed the weapons in progressive militarization of the struggle for “governable space”. In fact, Okrika people have had to deal with other forms of inter and intra-community skirmishes to the extent Okrika that had never been humiliated by strong enemies may have hurt itself irredeemably. In the main, militants remain vulnerable for recruitment in local conflicts over traditional leadership positions.

Intra Community Struggles for Chieftaincy Space

Although Britain militarily subjugated the Niger Delta City States but it did not destroy their chieftaincy institutions rather, these traditional political institutions were adapted under the policy of Indirect Rule. Lucy Mair in support of this view explains:

in territories where it is followed government does not accept the encouragement of European enterprises as a duty, but judges its values in light of the contribution which it can make to African development. The other aspect of Indirect Rule- the preservation of African institutions where the needs of the African themselves do not call for their modification is almost a natural corollary of this attitude toward European penetration (1936:12).

The chiefs played active roles in the colonial administration to the envy of the educated elites. They performed functions such as tax collection and administration of customary laws. The chieftaincy institution lost much of the power attributed to it by the colonial State yet; it remains appropriate institution of community representation in post-colonial Nigeria. At present, the institution has been integrated in to the State as an administrative extension, though this role is fraught with ambiguity due to the absence of any constitutional role assigned chieftaincy in the 1979, 1993, and 1999 constitutions. Among the Ijaws in the Eastern Delta, at the apex of the chieftaincy institution is the Amayanabo-a natural ruler (at the clan level), next in the hierarchy is the Amadabo who heads the communities/settlements, he is followed by a clan council of chiefs and a house rule system within the communities. Communities are composed of houses or

compounds with presiding chiefs. Occupation of the stool of the Amayanabo is hereditary and candidacy for the position is limited to a specified list of notables from those families who have the right to the throne (these are the Ado and Amakiri families in Okrika and Buguma respectively) and are elected solely by those from the royal families. The Amadabo of the communities/settlements are by tradition co-equals also, the stool is hereditary. The chiefs are the recognized heads of the larger extended families that trace their origin to a common ancestor, thus only direct descendants of a given lineage can aspire to the stool of the compound chief. In all cases access to the throne can be either patrilineal or matrilineal however, nobility in history or signal achievement mostly measured in terms of wealth warrants either creation of additional chieftaincy stools or conferment of honouary chieftaincy titles.

Ownership of land within a clan or community/compound is vested either in the Amayanabo or in the family, which traditionally has a chief as its head. The chief in consultation with the seniapu (elders) administers the land on behalf of the compound. For instance, the chief in council allocate land to family members according to their needs. However, for land outside the propriety rights of any compound, the Amayanabo in council allocates the land and collects rents on it on behalf of the community. The Amayanabo in council also approves settlements in the swamps and swamps used by MNOCs for laying pipelines and other oil prospecting activities. This implies that in the Niger Delta, compounds or communities are the most common unit of social aggregation around which local use and management of natural resources is organized. Each compound or community typically has a chief, seniapu (elders), traditional priests, elites, women and youths that are assigned roles in the traditional governance structure, but the State and MNOCs privileged the chiefs as their primary community interface.

The chiefs claim compensation from MNOCs for oil prospecting activities in the community. The basis of the claim is a provision in the Land Use Act that states that compensation for surface rights over land acquired for oil activities would be made to Traditional Rulers to disburse as they deemed fit in their tradition on behalf of their communities (Dule & Nwankwo 2001). Also designation as a host community brings benefits in the form of community development funds, and promises of labour and security contracts e.t.c. The MNOCs negotiate such contracts and benefits with community representatives who are mostly chiefs. Consequently chieftaincy institutions became more lucrative and their occupants more powerful and in turn a fiercely contested governance space in the Niger Delta. As competition to occupy chieftaincy stools intensified it is not uncommon to find interested candidates recruit youths who they provide money and small arms to intimidate perceived opponents in their struggle for access and control of chieftaincy space. The case of Okrika, Buguma and Ataba communities in Rivers State stand out in this regard.

Okrika clan is composed of major towns, communities, villages and fishing settlements located in three local government councils as follows: Ogu/Bolo, Port Harcourt city, and Okrika. Some communities have subordinate traditional rulers with the titles of Amadapu though some times referred to as Amayanabo by their subjects. Generally, Okrika like most Ijaw communities have only one king (Amayanabo) and Kirike town is the traditional seat of power and authority. Kirike town is polarized in to Tuboniju and

Koniju sections. Tuboniju through the Ado Royal family is vested with responsibility of selecting and installing an Amayanabo. This implies that the process of selecting and installing a new king is limited to the Tubonijus. Even among the Tuboniju it is only the Ado family that is vested with such powers (Nengisa, 2004). A new king can only be crown at the death of the incumbent and it is not every prince of the Royal family that is entitled to aspire to the stool, rather princes from the house whose turn it is to produce the king out of the six houses that constitute the Royal family are eligible to contest for the stool. After the death of the last Amayanabo of Okrika, king sir, S. P. U. Organ selection of a new one created factions within the royal family. Unfortunately the division permeated all spheres of Okrika clan particularly the realm of party politics. In the camp of Tuboniju are supporters and sympathizers of All Nigeria Peoples Party (ANPP) while majority of those in Koniju camp are easily associated with the ruling Peoples Democratic Party (PDP). Both factions have influential personalities from Okrika. Chief Rufus Ada George a former governor of Rivers State and Chief Ngere Rowland belong to Tuboniju while the former Secretary to Rivers State government and current Minister for transport, Dr. Abiye Sekibo and Dr. Promise Abam constitute the engine room of Koniju. Each faction has a militant wing. For example, Tuboniju was supported by an armed group known as Bush Boys or Peace Makers while Ateke Boys/Icelanders cult group that later transformed to Niger Delta Vigilante (NDV) provided security for Koniju. The presentation of Dr. Alfred Abam by the Konijus as a king elect to replace king Ibulubo through brute force provided by Ateke Boys resulted in sectarian cleansing of Tubonijus who were either raped, killed, maimed, banished from Okrika or have their houses destroyed or damaged. Nengisa underscores this fact thus:

The Konijus through the use of brute and crude force with ATEKE TOMBARI and his Vigilante ruthless squad crossed over and carried out ferocious, venomous, fiendish attack on the Tuboniju section that ousted King Ibuluboa. And his chiefs from Okrika territory destroying the palace in the process. This abominable and atrocious murderous action put as high as 1000 Tubonijus dead and sent 98% of the remnants into exile since September 2001. The Konijus flatulently presented Dr. Alfred Abam as a king elect to replace King Ibulubo even when it is clear that there is no vacant stool of Amayanabo (2004:7).

The climax of the chieftaincy conflict was the installation of Dr. Promise Abam a former member of the fiscal and mobilization commission in Abuja as Amayanabo of Okrika in mid night under heavy security provided by NDV and government security forces, after the candidate of Tuboniju installed king Charles Adokiye Dagogo Ibulubo and his supporters were forced out of the community. Here lies another cause of violence that shook Okrika for over five years. Koniju seizure of traditional power and authority from Tuboniju resulted in routing of its militant faction. The Bush Boys having been dislodged from Okrika relocated to a community called Okuru-Ama an out post okrika community from where it launched regular attacks on NDV's position at Okrika. Okuru Ama was in October 2001 invaded by NDV fighters who burnt down the community as a punishment for harbouring Bush Boys. By the end of October 27, 2001, the fall of Okuru-Ama was perfected as only the Anglican Church building was left standing. The Bush Boys after the Okuru Ama battle resettled at another Okrika community- Amadi - Ama just as Ateke Tom's militia spread through the whole state.

At Buguma, Asari led Ijaw Youth Council (IYC), an amalgamation of Ijaw youth organizations, formed at kaiama, Bayelsa state in 1998 to protest political domination, poverty, and economic exclusion of Ijaw ethnic nationality by the state and transnational oil companies was in control. Other organizations in the kalabari area were allies of IYC. The struggle of Ijaw youths then aimed at achieving self-determination and justice for the Ijaws attracted brutal response by state security forces. However, the military clamp down on the youths necessitated self-defensive mechanism to the extent that Ijaw youths resorted to acquiring arms in anticipation of future repression from state's security agencies; this imbued in the youths a militant consciousness (Ebiri, 2004). On return of democratic rule in 1999, the formidable grass-roots structure of IYC attracted patronage of the political and traditional ruling class who deployed the organization to achieve their political aspirations. The evolution of ethnic militia struggle in Buguma could be traced to mid 1990s with polarization of the community along the lines of "Dodoan Barracks Group" supported by Ombo Isokrari and "Aso Rock Group propped by A. K. Horsfall. These groups originated among contractors mainly those of Nigeria National Fertilizer Company (NAFCON) and Oil Mineral Producing Areas Development Commission (OMPADEC). Both groups were militias of sorts, although embryonic (David-West, 2004) in terms of possession of arms, capacity and determination to unleash violence. The Dodan Barracks and Aso Rock groups only had contract agenda.

Contest for the stool of Amayanabo of Kalabari militarized Buguma the traditional headquarters of kalabari clan. Like Okrika, the crisis started within the royal families and evolve around who should occupy the stool among the candidates that indicated interest. The community is one of the host communities of Cawthorne channel a site of several oil wells, flow stations and gas gathering projects operated by Shell Petroleum Development Company (SPDC). This attracted many business opportunities to all strata of the population, armed and cult groups emerged to compete for the benefits Cawthorne offered. The factions in the kingship tussle contracted the services of these armed groups in their quest for the throne. Notable among the groups are **Titanians** affiliate of Ateke's NDV. Asari, a relation of one of the candidates and then president of Ijaw Youth Council (IYC) stepped in and facilitated the installation of the current King of Kalabari by providing armed security that overwhelms the other armed groups who accepted defeat by retreating. The defeated groups with support of Ateke – leader of Icelander cult and Niger Delta Vigilante (NDV) reorganized and attacked the King's palace, although the paramount ruler escaped, his personal secretary, Prince Adolphus Amakiri was abducted and later beheaded. In addition, two mobile police officers attached to the residence of the Amayanabo were killed and their bodies mutilated, property of those loyal to the king were either burnt or vandalized as NDV fighters occupied Buguma.

The occupation of Buguma by forces linked to Ateke's NDV was perceived as modern enslavement of Kalabari by Okrika, consequently the elites of Buguma mobilized government support to flush out the armed groups. About this time, Asari launched a counter offensive that completely wiped out NDV fighters and their collaborators, one particular attack that elicited commendation from the people of Kalabari. The Rivers State government was accused of complicity in the chieftaincy conflicts because of the involvement of its principal officers, but the government expectedly denied involvement.

Ataba, a riverine community in Andoni local government area had since 1988 been polarized in to two factions over occupation of Okan Ama (king) stool. Major contenders to the throne are Chiefs Sampson Oruk and Benson Egwene. Each faction had its militia armed with sophisticated weapons to prosecute the chieftaincy project of the sponsor. Chief Oruk's faction was supported by a militia group known as Biafrans while that on the side of Chief Egwene were Nigerians. First out break of violence occurred in 1989 in which one Isaac Ebenezer, a cousin of chief Oruk was killed by Nigerians. The same militia struck again in 1995 resulting in the death of one Rufus Isaiah while Chief G.S.D. Ngor later died of trauma associated with the attack. The acrimonious relationship between factions in the Ataba chieftaincy crisis culminated in invasion of the community by Oruk's faction militia-Biafrans on August 15, 2004 to pulverize those in support of Egwene. Ebiri explains this fight for supremacy over who to superintend over Ataba in the following words:

In the early hours of August 15, 2004, several armed local militia men, mainly of Ataba extraction, in collaboration with recruited mercenaries from neighboring communities, launched an aggressive attack on Ataba, a remote riverine community in Andoni Local Council of Rivers State. The resultant killings and wanton destruction of property indicated that their mission was primarily to annihilate or drive out of the community persons perceived to be opposed to one of the parties involved in a local chieftaincy dispute.

In the process of the fierce attack on Ataba, over 60 persons were gruesomely murdered in cool blood in a manner that was unprecedented in the history of the community. Many houses were razed and callously reduced to rubbles. Property valued at millions of Naira were destroyed. Those who survived the atrocious incursion of Ataba were maimed and several of them have now turned refugees in neighboring communities. Today, Ataba is in complete ruin.

The extent of destruction was such that no one was left in doubt that dangerous explosives such as dynamites, petrol bombs, machines guns and lethal weapons, were freely used during the incursion. The selective pattern of the killings and destruction of property could also mean that military expertise was employed in executing the mayhem.... (2004:B5).

Although chieftaincy institution is not an alternative to state government, it is a particular manifestation of State intervention in rural communities hence the interest of the state government in those who aspire to occupy positions in the institution. For instance, state and Local Government council of chiefs are set up in different configurations to perform advisory and security functions to the State and federal governments. It is therefore not a surprise that chiefs were appointed delegates by both tiers of government to the just concluded National Political Reform Conference.

Furthermore, the legal provision that empowers the chieftaincy institution to collect and disburse monetary compensation over land used for oil production activities has fueled both inter and intra community conflicts by funneling large sums money to the institution many of which it failed to distribute to all segments of its population. Due to this dubious and corrupt practice, in many communities, internal splits have emerged with common divide being between elites of communities and chiefs, youths and the chiefs, youths and MNOCs staff and between factions of youth. For instance, in Buguma, Pawariso Samuel Horsefall, former Commissioner for Ecological Affairs and one of the supporters of the King in the tussle for the throne of Amanyanabo of Kalabari used his

relationship with the king for economic advantage. The king played along until Pawariso's desire to appropriate the last batch of Daewoo (major contractor for the Cawthron Channel project) employment positions allotted to the community created a deep divide between them. It was alleged that the former Commissioner contracted Ateke Tom leader of NDV and Icelander cult to attack the king's palace over the Daewoo employment disagreement.

Since the mid 1990s, the youths of communities in Rivers State like their other Niger Delta counterparts, started aggressive demands for dismantling of the hierarchical traditional leadership institutional structures in favour of more horizontal arrangement that will afford them the opportunity to participate in the decision making process over sharing of money from the oil companies. The MNOCs, determined to remain in business, have in turn been compelled to make cash payments to the youths for access to facilities or to ensure the security of their business operations (Peterside, 2001). This has enhanced the lethal capacities of militant groups. Contending street cults and criminal rings or organizations linked to drug trafficking and other criminal activities, can produce violent situations depending on the way distribution is organized.

Emergence of Urban Cults and Struggle for Control of illicit Business Space

The first university fraternity, Pyrates confraternity was founded in 1952 by Wole Soyinka and six other colleagues at the University of Ibadan with the objectives of promoting social awareness and fighting social injustice. This fraternity soon spread to other Nigerian universities where internal leadership crisis created factions, pull-outs and proliferation of campus fraternities. Contest for spheres of influence between fraternities from the 1980s often result in violent clashes in which small arms and light weapons are freely used, to the extent that most universities have been turned into battle-field. The universities in Port Harcourt have been engulfed in this wind of violence blowing across the Nigerian universities. In 1991 colleges in the city of Port Harcourt imbibed this confraternity culture as students established various fraternities that replicated the contest for control of spheres of influence. The Rivers State government in response to the conflicts banned boarding for colleges located in the city of Port Harcourt. Government effort yielded little result as the cults left the colleges only to reappear on the streets and slum settlements.

Continuation of the urban bias colonial development policy that exploited natural resources from the rural areas for development of urban centers by the State encouraged rural –urban drift as most rural inhabitants especially the youths migrated to the cities in search for better life (Olatunbosun 1975). Lack of attention and commitment to alleviating the plight of oil communities in terms of provision of basic social amenities, continuous shrinking of physical space that in the past sustained traditional livelihood means such as farming and fishing due to environmental degradation and increased oil production activities accentuated migration of the productive segment of the population to the city. This forced migration put available

social infrastructure and social services under severe pressure. For instance, excruciating housing problem gave rise to springing up of squatter/slum settlements along the water fronts. These settlements lack social amenities, state security presence in form of police station or post that made them safe heaven for criminals. Children born in these settlements and those whose parents were compelled to take up residence there took to the streets establishing a sub culture different from that accepted by the larger society. While the girls embraced prostitution to augment family income, the boys took to crime to earn a living. This is how the slums created pools of vulnerable young men who provide the foundation for urban cults and gangs. Most urban cults and gangs originated in the slum settlements from where they spread to communities. At Okrika, Icelander and Black Bra-the women wing, were active. The Bush Boys, former number one cult group in Okrika and Greenlanders flourish at Amadi-Ama. We have stated somewhere earlier that Asari and IYC were in charge at Buguma while at Bukuma, Klansmen Konfraternity (KK) led by Onengiye Ofori Terika (alias Occasion Boy) was in charge. Occasion boy was killed in an inter-cult conflict hence his command dissolved into NDV's command. At Tombia, Owie was in control and at Ogbakiri it was a group known as Deebam led by Ichechi Owaka (alias Angel). In the Ikwerre area, Elegemface was in charge (Agbo 2004). Ate Tom's NDV or Icelander absorbed most of these groups. In Port Harcourt metropolis, Deewell and Vikings also aligned with the Icelander.

A location analysis of the groups showed that two power blocks exist, namely Okirika and Kalabari. Asair Dokubo and Ateke Tom shared the leadership to their benefits. Ateke's control of cult groups in Kalabari, Asari's homeland often resulted in bloody clashes. The high point was November 22, 2003 when affiliates of NDV and NDPVF clashed at Buguma. Availability and use of fire arms negatively affected behaviour, mobility and societal cohesion. The impression seems to be created that violence pays. Lack of opportunities through legitimate avenues has made most youths believe that violence is the only option left open to them to reverse the decades of neglect and finally gain a small foot hold from which they can help themselves (Hurst-Croft 2005).

Search for illegal sectors of social mobility gave rise to fights over control of organized crime in Port Harcourt such as drug dealing, robberies, car theft, extortion rackets, and petty theft. Although there is absence of stable hierarchies or long established leaders capable of imposing their control on these activities, in drug trade, the cult groups carved out Port Harcourt metropolis in to territories, which their leaders control to avoid clash of interests between drug barons. The cult leaders were paid to provide security protection for drug traffickers. Street sales require peddlers, packers, watchdogs, and assistants to handover the drug to customers. Depending on the peddler, different types of persons are employed. Generally, large numbers of youths between ages 15 and 25 who are hope less are recruited in to the business. Some of these recruits are women who are less harassed and evoked less suspicion from security operatives. Diobu with a long history for drug business became a major source of attraction therefore, a battle- ground between the cult groups. Furthermore, who controls Abonnema Wharf reputed as a hot centre of crime was another bone of contention. These drug zones are rarely raided by the police force because the police chiefs receive regular protection and settlement fees from the drug barons and cult

chiefs. For instance, Mile one Police Station in Diobu demarcated the area among cultists. Deybam got Abonnema Wharf while Njemanze Vigilante Group maintained watch over the water front. Deybam an affiliate of NDPVF was relocated by the police to Echue and Timber streets known as White house Vigilante Group (Nwosu 2004). However, there were few instances of arrests due to either delay in payment of protection fees or greed. When put under pressure to act, the police often submit to the superior fire- power of cult groups protecting drug traffickers. With the rise of NDV and NDPVF the drug gangs quickly aligned with either of the militia groups to consolidate their trade zones. Quest for territorial expansion by drug barons and cult chiefs necessitated inter gang invasion of territories to the extent that the city of Port Harcourt that was once safe and secure from violence became exposed to multiplicity of arms conflict. Similarly, struggles to control the profit of stolen crude further heighten militarization and proliferation of small arms in Rivers state.

Struggle for Supremacy of Oil Bunkering Space

The opportunities, which oil bunkering, offered armed gangs; cults and ethnic militias constitute a worrying aspect of the conflict dynamics. Bunkering provides the resources necessary to fund and sustain a high-level conflict and readily available (Hurst-Croft 2005). Illegal oil bunkering in the Niger Delta has a long and complex history that must not detain us here; interestingly the complexity is what sustains its pervasiveness. It is a racket led by top officers of the State (especially politicians and security officers) international petro-business class as well as staff of Multi-National Oil Companies (MNOCs), though since year 2000, the logistics of the operations do not necessarily require the co-operation of MNOCs staff (Human Rights Watch, 2003). The cartel of this theft of oil, initially established armed gangs to defend their operations through patrol of creeks and water ways to ward off state security operatives and to escort products to points of evacuation on the high seas. Apart from policing the creeks and water ways, leaders of the gangs also supply the labour that tap directly into the pipelines or wellheads owned by Joint Ventures that operate Nigeria's oil industry, and connect the pipes to large barges hidden in the creeks where the mangrove forest provide the needed cover.

A major source of labour is youths recruited from impoverished rural communities and urban slum settlements (already members of criminal gangs, cults, and militia groups) who are in endless search for illegitimate avenues of social mobility. Being unemployed, with uncertain future, participation in oil bunkering process readily promise prestige, power and wealth, and the possibility to plunder. Bunkerers apart from settling all the security agencies financially before any ship loads at any of the manifolds were forced to pay royalty to the youths of the village where the manifolds are located. To Asari Dokubo and Ateke Tom, the Bunkerers were made to pay "ground rent" for each barge loaded and also pay for an equivalent price for hiring imaginary one hundred youths from the host community. The "asphyxiating and unfriendly terrain comprising thick mangrove forests and swamps" (Ukeje 2002) criss-crossed by creeks, rivers and canals are unique features of the Niger Delta that make it possible for bunkerers to evade the State. Perhaps, effective policing of the water -ways is made impossible because retired

and serving security officers constitute the nucleus of oil bunkering cartel (Human Rights Watch, 2003).

By year 2003, leaders of the armed gangs, cults and militias transformed from marketers of violence (security) to bunkers having acquired the infrastructure and technical skills for the sophisticated operation that oil bunkering entails. The leaders of these groups raked in huge profits from this illegal oil business because they do not have to pay for security that is readily provided by their subordinates. Here lies the circumstance that launched Asari and Ateke into prominence since locations of oil facilities and trade routes (creeks) associated with the business are mostly within Kalabari and Okrika communities. Agbo explains this point thus:

...in Port Harcourt Metropolis, the take-off and exist points are the Abuloma jetty, Abonnema Wharf and Okrika. A take off from any of these locations eventually leads into the new Calabar River...Bakanna backs Abonnema Wharf to the creek and overlooks the New Calabar River. From here the gas flare from Cawthorne Channel glows the night and day. Further on, the new Calabar River divides into two. To the right is Buguma, Tombia and Ogbakiri, ancient Kalabari Towns. After this the river forks into a village called Awoba and, after it is Ire Bille, a fishing settlement, a very important location in the map of oil bunkering. After the strategic fishing settlement is the Bille Manifold, operated by SPDC. This is the place where the big barges steal crude oil under the supervision of the Navy Houseboat at Cathorne Channel II. The Bille Manifold is located deep inside swampy creeks and not accessible except in full tide. It is mostly used only by big barges owned by big bunkerers. Its advantage is that next to it is the open sea at Bonny where they discharge into waiting ships. The bigger barges that cannot make it to Cawthorne Channel I conveniently load at Bille Manifold.

To the left, the New Calabar River leads to Cawthorne Channel I houseboat and the Navy houseboats face each other at opposite sides of the river. Adjacent to the Navy houseboat is Deawoo Construction. To the left, the Adamakiri creeks are like legendary oil rivers; four manifolds are located here, adjacent to Cawthorne Channel I. A little upfront is the Alakiri Manifold. This nexus is the loading point for another set of bunkerers who use Andoni and Bonny Rivers as their points of discharge....There are four manifolds at the Adamakiri fields, and these offer tremendous advantage. Because the manifolds are many, many barges load at different locations at the same time.

Attempts to penetrate each other self- acclaimed domain resulted in fights for control of the creeks and associated benefits. This became a significant factor in escalation of violence in the Niger delta. Human Rights Watch report (2005) underscores this point as follows:

Some of the most intensive fighting between October 2003 and 2004 centered around villages located on tributaries about twenty to forty kilometers south west of Port Harcourt, including Buguma, Bukuma, Tombia, and Ogbakiri. This is Asari's home area and the site of several oil wells, flow stations and gas gathering projects operated by Shell Petroleum Development company in the Cawthorne channel...Asari and Tom were most likely interested in manipulating a local dispute to gain control of Tombia and Bukuma because of their proximity to lucrative bunkering routes in the Cawthorne channel. Both Asari and Tom armed their new recruits from this area with sophisticated weapons and speed boats to facilitate bunkering.

The tendency has been to exclusively associate the root of insurgency in the region to fight for control of the process and benefits of oil bunkering. This brand of analysis is not entirely new. For instance, Collier (2000) adopting the economic theory of conflict

supports this view. According to him, the underlying cause of conflict is economic-resource predation, that regardless of why any organization is fighting, it can only fight if it is financially viable to do so. In other words, while resource predation during conflict may not be the objective of a rebel organization, it is essentially its means of financing conflict. In spite of the impeccable background of Collier's statistical findings, resource predation is difficult to sustain as a principal causative factor of conflict in the Niger Delta context. The danger in identifying resource predation as the root of insurgency in the region is obvious. Rather than see militancy as deriving from grievances against the state for its oppressive and unjust policies on the area, it is perceived as organized crime geared towards occupation of functional space. Important as the economic theory of conflict may seem, it suffers from inadequate analysis of the origin of the violence that engulfed the region. The reality of the Niger Delta conflict dynamics is that resource predation is a factor of conflict prolongation and not its cause. For example, payment of operational allowance to combatants, running cost of camps, payment of instructors and purchase of weapons by NDPVF and NDV appear to be funded with proceeds from oil bunkering. These facilities and skills no doubt, constituted the heart of NDPVF and NDV operation. Recruitment of ethnic militia and other armed groups' leaders by politicians from the ruling political party to secure their victory through violence and intimidation escalated militia activities.

Party Politics and Electoral Space

The expansion of petroleum production, which contributes 85% to 90% of State revenue, heightens the centrality of the State as the locus of struggle for resources for personal advancement and group security. The State assumed the capacity to determine who gets what, when and how (Joseph 1987). The social class or elites who succeeded in capturing the State administered it to the exclusion of those disempowered in the contestation process. Although the Nigerian State operated as a captured terrain, for too long, elites of the dominant ethnic nationalities (either civilian or military) who ruled it plundered it to the neglect of the Niger Delta. Also the long years of military dictatorship deepen alienation of the region from the State. Thus the expectations were high among the political elites from Niger Delta that return of democratic rule in 1999 would enhance access to the State. Elections are central to liberal politics and require a liberal political culture of tolerance, impartial administration of elections and justice, including a level playing ground for their organization and conduct, and the general public acceptance of their outcomes. Paradoxically the process of democratic rule resulted in militarization of politics through commodification of violence the logic of which negates democracy.

The picture that emerges from this is a political culture which views politics as a form of war, in which the pursuit of power by the political class has led to lack of respect for the formal rules governing party electoral competition, with competitive electoral politics assuming ruthless dimensions, since on zero-sum calculations, it is assumed that the winner wins all, and the loser loses all. Under such circumstances, instead of democracy being anchored on tolerance, moderation, fair play under the rule of law and respect for the sanctity of the electoral process, it has become a tragedy in which the political leadership and the masses of the people are increasingly in fraudulent electoral practices

and the violence they spun. Central to this political culture which views electoral politics as a form of war is creation and use of cult groups and militias by political parties in power either as part of their electioneering campaign arsenal or election control mechanism.

Prior to 1999, most neighbourhoods in the Rivers State capital organized self defence or vigilante groups that consisted of residents who take up arms and other dangerous weapons to protect their families and property. In addition, wealthy residents invested in sophisticated alarms, security guards, and other forms of private policing to safeguard their property. These weapons resurfaced in the 1999 democratic process though in a mid form due to presence of the military that facilitated the transition to democratic rule. All Nigeria Peoples Party (ANPP) cleared the 1999 general elections in Okrika speaking local government areas thereby affirming Chief Rufus Ada George's (former governor of Rivers State) control of the area. The 2003 democratic process exacerbated violence as the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) deployed its incumbent identities to capture political strongholds outside areas of the party's influence. Thus, idle youths that operate as political thugs and militia groups were recruited because of their fire-powers and paid heavily for their services there by transforming violence in to a commodity priced and purchased in the democratic process. The term commodification of violence is used to explain the current situation in which violence is converted to a commodity but unlike any other commodity it is only sold and bought in the democratic process hence there were armed security appendages of political parties. In preparation for 2003 elections, top government officials and politicians supported both Asari and Ateke through funding of what was called "logistics" since the political system celebrates vulgar display of stolen wealth or arrogance of power. Where chieftaincy wrangling exists, such was exploited by politicians desperate for power.

The former Secretary to Rivers State government and current Minister for Transport Dr. Abiye Sekibo was linked to providing logistic and political protection to Ateke Tom leader of Niger Delta Vigilante (NDV), and his cult, Icelanders to counter the dominance of the opposition All Nigeria Peoples Party (ANPP) in Okrika local government area during the 2003 election. The tussle for the stool of the Amanyanabo of Okrika between Chief (Dr.) Abam and Chief Dagogo was couched as a PDP-ANPP affair to the security agencies. Consequently the PDP supported Chief (Dr.) Abam while ANPP backed Chief Dagogo. It is within this context that Ateke Tom who was sent on exile by the Peace Makers or Bush Boys, was made to return to Okrika to champion the course of PDP. In the hound for PDP perceived enemies, prominent Okrika sons, including a former governor of the State and an ANPP stalwart, Chief Rufus Ada George were driven to exile with their property destroyed. Ateke Tom was also used to chase away supporters of ANPP from Ogu/Bolo local government area prior to 2003 elections. To compensate Ateke he was "given free rein to carry out profitable bunkering activities in exchange for his group's violent services during 2003 elections"(Ofiebor 2004).

Leader of Niger Delta Peoples Volunteer Force (NDPVF) Asari Dokubo was also given financial and logistics support by the Rivers Sate PDP government to capture the leadership of the Ijaw Youths Council (IYC) to limit the increasing influence of the

council in Rivers State. This was how Asari emerged president of IYC in an election noted for heavy security presence. The assumption of office as president provided Asari the opportunity to recruit youths to work with Ateke to ensure governor Odili's victory in the 2003 election. Intra party struggle for control of PDP in Asari-Toru local government area exacerbated militia violence. For example, Mr. Pawariso Horsfall a former commissioner in Odili's cabinet engaged other leaders of the party in the area in a fight for supremacy. Decamping of chief Diamond Tobin-West, former chair of Asari-Toru Local Government Council from All Nigeria Peoples Party (ANPP) to PDP strengthened the opposition against Horsfall's ambition and added militia culture to political contestation. Consequently, in March 2003, members of Ateke Tom's Niger Delta Vigilante (or Icelanders cult) invaded Buguma, destroyed Chief Tobin's house, killed some of his relations and took their corpses away.

The involvement of the armed groups in the democratic process catapulted their leaders and members to positions of political prominence. This was a visible success of violence as a means to secure political ends and sets a precedent that violence is a legitimate way to gain political power. The Human Rights Watch (2003) reported that the level of violence in the 2003 elections in Rivers State amounted to a low intensity armed struggle in which weapons and firearms of various types were used freely. Within this context, possibilities for force resulting from wide spread availability and use of arms seems to offer more effective way to resolve basic questions of political power. Rivers state would have been spared the orgy of violence if democratic standards were maintained and rules of political contestation scrupulously observed. Violence free Delta remains an illusion because the political terrain is where criminal acts are endorsed rationalized and defended on grounds that are untenable.

The armed youth groups and militias rapidly evolved from political appendages to dominant institutions due to the inability of the political elites to control their leaders, a contradiction of commodification of violence. The deepening contradictions assumed the form of splits and formation of alliances and counter alliances among armed and militia groups either to secure their loot from the State or to fight among themselves for the highest bidder in the volatile democratic process. This explains the financial capacity of the groups to acquire sophisticated weapons. Guns intensify violence because they are more deadly than other weapons thus provide the user the power to kill quickly. They are powerful tools for coercing people and ensuring their compliance since they are deadly (Cook & Ludwig 2002b). Consequently, a significant conflict escalator is the existence of small arms market in the region that has eroded respect for traditional and formal forms of authority, and increased incidence of violence involving firearms.

CONCLUSION

Early protests by people of the Niger Delta over oppressive practices of the State involved peaceful methods that yielded no result. As the pains and cries of poverty intensify, youth militancy emerged as an alternative approach to draw attention to the plight of inhabitants of the region. The State's response to this method of the struggle is massive deployment of military forces to crush popular pressures. To resist the deadly

military might of the State, armed confrontation was adopted by the youths as a defense mechanism.

Development deficits in the oil communities drove the active and productive population to the crowded city of Port Harcourt there by escalated the problem of housing shortages and creation of urban slums or settlements that facilitated breakdown of family norms and other sources of authority and as a result organized crime flourished. The elites in search for economic and political gains consider violence a commodity to be captured and used in contestation for such governable space as chieftaincy, inter-ethnic struggle for oil benefits, oil bunkering, and political power. Similarly the youths in endless search for illegal avenues of social mobility due to shrinking of legitimate space became marketers of violence and drugs that generated inter group/gang rivalry. The interrelationship between the democratic process and violence was complicated as political incumbents, candidates and political parties contracted armed youths and militias in the contest for access and control of political power. Consequently, the danger in identifying violence in the region as terrorism is that the State will more likely intensify militarization of the Niger Delta supposedly to eliminate terror, rather than initiate fundamental socio-economic response to mitigate the sources of violence.

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