

Identity Politics and Conflict in Nigeria: A Criminological Focus on Oil and Oil Producing Communities in the Niger Delta

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Abstract

This study explored identity mobilization and conflict among oil producing communities in the Niger Delta in Nigeria with an analysis of conflict involving Eket and Ibena people in Akwa Ibom State. Fashioned after the survey tradition, primary data were obtained from key informant interviews while published materials provided secondary data. Inspired by the social disorganization theory, findings show how increasing recognition of the accumulative potentials of oil engendered violent conflict between the two ethnic groups as they struggled for greater access to oil benefits. Youths carried out the violent clashes, while local elites fueled the conflict by providing political coverage and arms. Identity mobilization through discourses of autochthony and locality played a central role in the conflict, as each group was organized in order to enhance competitive efficiency. The conflict shows the centrality of oil in Nigeria's political economy, and how it shapes both national political discourse and the broad rhythms of accumulation, rent-seeking disposition and social conflict, including conflict among oil producing communities.

Key words: Oil, Ethnic identity, Conflict, Niger Delta, Crime.

Introduction

The Niger Delta region of Nigeria is plagued by violent conflicts arising from the social relations of oil production and its fetishistic qualities, which are inseparable from its character as a geophysical property (Watts, 2005a). Oil forms the basis of the political economy of the Nigerian state, and is central in the struggle for control and distribution of resources by various groups (Obi, 2004). Studies show that oil is instrumental in shaping national political discourse and the broad rhythms of accumulation and social conflict (Karl, 1997; Frynas, 2000). Omeje (2004) explores the ways in which oil rents influence local accumulation processes and the changing dynamics of communal violence among oil-bearing communities in the Niger Delta. This article attempts to contribute to this literature by analyzing identity transformation and ethnic conflict in the oil-producing areas of Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria.

Youths, defined in opposition to “elders” (Brown, 2006; and Nolte, 2004), serve as the vanguard of oil conflicts in the Niger Delta. As a fluid, vulnerable and permeable category which is historically and socially situated (Gore and Pratten, 2003), youths are malleable to mobilization in resource conflicts. Illiteracy, poverty, unemployment, substance abuse and the availability of illegal arms combine to make Niger Delta youths a major player in violent conflicts. Watts (2009: 91) notes that as a social category of historical and cultural depth, youth provides “an idiom in a gerontocratic and authoritarian setting in which power, secrecy, and sometimes violence can be harnessed as a sort of counter-movement, built on the ruins of failed oil development”.

Niger Delta youths are notorious for militancy and violence (Ikelegbe, 2001). Their predilection to violence arises from the utility of violence in securing access to resources. Ifeka (2006) argues that youths are increasingly pursuing their demands by violent means. Niger Delta youths have been active in resistance politics since the early 1960s, periodically attacking oil installations and pipelines. Their social and political marginalization makes them vulnerable to mobilization for violence by an emerging class of local elites (Brown, 2006). Therefore, youths' involvement in ethnic conflicts in the Niger Delta is partly shaped by the forces of neo-patrimonialism and the Nigerian social structure. Local political elites fuel ethnic conflicts to

profit from the oil economy. They orchestrate and fund conflicts for resource accumulation and recruit youths into these conflicts in order to achieve their self-centered interests. In the conflict between Eket and Ibeno ethnic groups, local elites on both sides provided arms for the warring youth groups. But the alliance between youths and elders is tenuous as the youths frequently accuse the elders of colluding with the state and oil company to exploit the community. The alliance is “qualified by covert cross-cutting 'marriages' of convenience without political principle but for financial gain” (Ifeka, 2006: 118).

The real situation is that the politics of rent-seeking in Nigeria (Ikelegbe, 2001; Omeje, 2004; Watts, 2009), has given rise to a kleptocracy built on the primitive accumulation of oil wealth. This shoddy system of accumulation is not unconnected with the conflicts in the Niger Delta as oil-bearing communities fight over the little that trickle down in the form of derivation fund and developmental projects supported by oil companies. In many instances, these struggles are used by the state and oil companies to divert attention from their culpability in the destruction of the region's environment and impoverishment of the people. In the conflict between Eket and Ibeno ethnic groups, age-long struggle over identity, citizenship and land ownership/title has overlapped with struggle for oil benefits. The link between identity and oil conflict is an enduring fascination in current research on the Niger Delta. The link does not necessarily invoke a “resource curse”. Following Watts (2009: 81),

the language of curse invokes a merciless force for adversity, a sort of commodity determinism that vests oil with capabilities it can neither possess nor dispense”. Resource curse “substitutes the commodity (oil) for the larger truths of capitalism, markets and politics”. Therefore, Watts (2009: 83) suggests the need to “carefully specify the complex traffic between petroleum and economics or politics in order to be able to chart the contours of the work that oil is doing for us in talking about petro-states or oil politics.

In this article, we explore the ways in which identity is mobilized in the struggle for oil benefits and how this shapes conflicts between oil producing communities; and trace the rise of oil as a mechanism of conflict in the Niger Delta. But the local view cannot be “rigidly demarcated from the crucial consequences of oil rents on the state, on national political discourse, and on the broad rhythms of accumulation” (Watts, 2005: 190), and “globalized oil and gas reveals precisely how global forces are always localized in place or region-specific 'oil complexes” (Watts, 2009: 83). Therefore, oil conflicts in the Niger Delta follow a description of the political economy of oil in Nigeria. We then analyze identity mobilization and conflict over oil benefits in the context of criminality.

Theory and Method

The idea of socially disorganized neighbourhoods fostering crime through the diminished ability to maintain informal social control over the behaviour of residents (Akers and Sellers, 2013) speaks to this situation. Sampson (1995) extends the argument to include community ecology, impact of urbanization, economic conditions, and rapid changes in the national and global spheres that affect the locality, and the rent-seeking disposition. All these, arguably, add up to the justification of this theory as the pivot for this work.

Methodologically, this work is anchored on the survey design. Via a multi-stage sampling technique involving: purposive, clustered, stratified, systematic, and simple random sampling method key informants were reached for primary data. In line with major variables which informed the themes, analysis of data was qualitative (Wincup, 2017).

Oil and Nigeria's Political Economy

Nigeria is a vast, multi-ethnic geo-political entity located in the west coast of Africa. It has a land mass of 923, 770 km² and a population of over two hundred (200) million people; and is endowed with abundant human

and natural resources, which suggest great potentials for economic growth and development. The natural resource endowment of the country includes vast petroleum and gas reserves, climatic variation supporting large-scale and variegated agricultural production, a vast and extensive land mass and a large population of people who constitute a giant internal market of consumers. Nigeria's agricultural production capacity has potential for commercialization and large-scale exportation of food crops and raw materials for the manufacturing of industrial goods. But the agricultural sector has been neglected since commercial oil production began in the 1950s. The rise of oil as the engine of the economy led to the decline of agricultural production. This has had negative effects on national development, including food insecurity, massive unemployment of rural peasants and large-scale rural-urban migration. Nigeria, a former regional exporter of agricultural commodities such as cocoa, palm products and timber, is now a "dependent petro-state governed by an oligarchic network of criminally negligent politicians" (Lubeck, 2001: 247). Nigeria is the largest producer of crude oil in Africa and the sixth largest exporter in the world. An estimated two million barrels of crude oil are produced in Nigeria daily (VCL, 2003). Changes in global energy security policy following September 11, 2001 spurred inflation in the significance of Nigeria's oil sector. Oil and gas, which boasts of an estimated annual export value of \$90 billion, accounts for about 37- 40 percent of Nigeria's GDP, 95 percent of foreign exchange earnings, and 83 percent of federal government revenue (US Department of Energy, 2009).

Oil fosters a system of accumulation and distribution based on political patronage. This corrupt system of accumulation creates "disincentives and barriers to transformative and dynamic investments which could raise the productivity of the agricultural and manufacturing sectors" (Lubeck, 2001: 248). It also perpetuates "a multi-layered, institutionalized oligarchy consisting of self-serving politicians, business people, political fixers, (and) 'godfathers'" (Lubeck, 2001: 248). There is scarcity of petroleum products such as cooking gas and kerosene due to incessant increase in the pump prices of products.

The Rentier theory provides a critical perspective on the political economy of oil in Nigeria. It explains the dependence of states on rents from extractive resource, taxes and royalties paid by MNOCs and profits from equity stakes in investments. Dependence on rents has implications for democracy and development in resource rich countries like Nigeria, where politics is not only shaped by an inherited colonial structure which thrives on taxes and rents, but also by the luxury of natural resource revenues or "rentier largesse" (Omeje, 2006: 11). Oil revenue accounts for a greater part of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and shapes national income distribution "at the expense of the real productive sectors of the economy" (Omeje, 2007: 5).

Dependence on oil rents perpetuates distortion of the structure of the political economy, marginalizes non-rentier productive sectors and generates "a convoluted culture of accumulation and politics that conforms to the imperatives of 'rent-speak'" (Omeje, 2007: 6). It also generates feelings of deprivation among the poorest ranks of the society, especially the Niger Delta. It exacerbates violent clashes among oil producing communities as well as clashes between oil producing communities and MNOCs, involving destruction of oil installations and kidnapping of oil workers. Violent clashes between communities in the oil producing region are linked to struggle for oil benefits, including compensations and oil company-sponsored development projects.

The Niger Delta

The Niger Delta is a vast coastal plain in the southernmost part of Nigeria where the Niger River drains into the Atlantic Ocean in the Gulf of Guinea. A combination of mangrove forests, swamps and coastal ridges render the area fertile and habitable for a vast biodiversity and a high density of human population deriving their livelihoods from its rich resource base. The area covers approximately 25, 900 square kilometers (ERML, 1997). It also includes all oil-producing area and others considered relevant for reasons of administrative convenience, political expedience and development objectives. It is the oxygen bag of

Nigeria's economy. The Niger Delta is a paradox of poverty in the midst of plenty (Brown and Okon, 2011). In spite of its rich resource endowment, the region is one of the poorest in Nigeria. Inadequate and poor-quality infrastructure, poverty and unemployment, low standard of living and diseases are among the key features of the region (UNDP Human Development Report, 2006). These problems are exacerbated by the destructive effects of oil production on local economic activities (fishing and farming), which in turn contribute to the spate of violent conflicts witnessed in the region.

The discovery and extraction of oil and mineral resources in the Niger Delta is the second phase in the exploitation of natural resources in the region. Prior to the discovery of oil, the colonial government exported palm oil for the manufacturing of consumer goods such as pomade and margarine in Europe. The extraction of natural resources to meet the rising demand for industrial raw materials in Europe during the colonial era infringed upon the social structures, cultural resources and ecological systems of the Niger Delta. It also laid the foundation for the exploitation and under-development of the area in post-colonial Nigeria. The impoverishment and environmental degradation of the region took a different turn with the discovery of oil. Oil production is based on the "marriage of interests" between the Nigerian state and foreign oil capital, which began during the colonial era. During this period, Shell secured permission to prospect for oil in the Niger Delta area on the basis of a joint venture between Shell and British Petroleum (BP). Shell served as the technical partner while BP provided political backing and collected rents on behalf of the British government. This alliance indulged the pillaging of the Niger Delta environment. As Omoweh (2005: 117) explains:

The kind of relationship that existed between Shell-BP and the colonial state, in terms of oil exploitation and production, therefore was such that the ownership of the oil acreages resided with the state, especially as it owned the land and its content, while the oil company not only provided the technology for finding and winning oil, but got the land on which it prospected for oil on lease from the state and paid rent for it. This is the origin of how the oil producing areas...were turned into minefields, irrespective of whether they were places of abode for people or not.

The Mineral Act of 1914 leased the oil companies, but did not protect the oil-bearing communities from hazards. The post-colonial state inherited this arrangement, and retained the content of the 1914 Mineral Act in its Land Use Act of 1978. The Land Use Act places and arrogates land containing natural resources, which is leased to oil companies in return for royalties. The oil companies are responsible to the state, while the local people are treated as 'squatters.' The state hardly confronts the oil companies over the environmental impact of oil production because of its dependence on rents. Any attempt of the oil producing communities to seek redress for the destruction of their environment and livelihoods is regarded as a threat to the oil business. The state often uses force to suppress protests and other expressions of grievances by the Niger Delta people (Omeje, 2004). This has propelled counter-measures in the form of armed struggles by militant groups since the state only seemingly understands the language of violence (Ikelegbe, 2001).

The Niger Delta is the epicenter of violent conflicts. Foreign oil workers have been abducted or held hostage within oil facilities. Militia groups have carried out spectacular attacks on on-shore and off-shore oil facilities, costing the Nigerian government an estimated \$6.8 billion in revenue loss between 1999 and 2004, in addition to an estimated 396, 000 metric tons of oil products lost to pipeline vandalism and illegal oil bunkering. Militia groups also engage federal and state security forces in armed struggle, using their skills in navigating the hundred miles of mangrove creeks traversing the Bight of Benin to their advantage. Hundreds of people have been killed in these clashes. One estimate puts the cost to the Nigerian state of conflicts in the Niger Delta at \$60 million per day.

Struggle for Oil Benefits between Eket and Ibena

Conflict is 'a struggle over values and claims to scarce status, power and resources in which the aims of the opponents are to neutralize, injure or eliminate their rivals' (Coser, 1956: 8). It arises from changes in the social environment, such as contestable access to new political positions, or perception of new resources arising from development in the physical environment as individuals and groups seek to use these resources to achieve their goals (Otite, 2004). This trajectory played out in the conflict between Eket and Ibena people. The discovery of oil and the benefits accruing to oil producing communities escalated sporadic disputes over land, giving rise to protracted conflicts between ethnic groups that had previously existed in relative harmony. The biggest oil producing company in Akwa Ibom State is Mobil. It operates in a joint venture with the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC). Mobil began production in the 1960s. The effects of oil production on aquatic life and farmlands elicited protests from the local people. Oil spills made fishing and farming difficult, so the people demanded control of oil spills and/or compensation by petitioning the government and the oil company (Ukeje, 2001; Joab-Peterside, 2001). However, when petitions failed, the people became virulent in their agitations. They occupied oil facilities and seized boats belonging to Mobil. In response, Mobil sought to palliate the people by employing indigenes, offering scholarships and grants for small-scale entrepreneurs.

Oil spills became frequent and violent protests also became common. Mobil responded by undertaking development projects such as electrification, road construction, and provision of portable water and corrugated roofing sheets to replace huts decimated by gas flares. It also provided improved varieties of seedlings, fertilizers and farming implements for local farmers. These measures sensitized the people to the economic significance of oil and the usefulness of conflict in securing oil benefits. "It was when Mobil began doing so many things for us that our people realized that oil could bring good things", stated a key informant. This brings the realities of social disorganization to the fore. The increasing recognition of the accumulative potential of oil gave rise to violence as a "technology of gain"² in the struggle for oil benefits. Violent clashes also ensued between oil producing communities as different ethnic groups sought a greater share of oil benefits. Ibena people accused Eket people of commandeering development projects. Eket people, on the other hand, claimed that they own the land while Ibena are squatters. As such they were entitled to a greater share of oil benefits. Ibena people responded that the notion of 'settlers' was used to marginalize them in the distributive process. They said they deserve a greater share of oil benefits because they inhabit the area where oil production activities take place and therefore suffer more from the effects of oil production. Identity contestations formed the seedbed of the conflict, which has continued sporadically till date.

Identity Mobilization and Resource Conflict

Identity is a problematic concept (Hall, 1990; McCrone, 1998). It is an important resource in politics, which is the manipulation of resources for the control of power (Nnoli, 1995). Identity is seen as a people's sense of belonging to a group and the influence this has on their behaviour (Jega, 2000). Hall (1990) and McCrone (1998) conceptualize identity as cultural representation that facilitates or restricts choice. Cohen (1974) points out that identity is constructed from ethnic consciousness and traditional customs associated with individuals or groups of individuals. It consists of history, language and cultural symbols. It is constructed by individuals and groups based on the consciousness of who they are as against who the others are (Ajala, 2008). Identity serves as an organizing principle of social action. It is often deployed in politics as an idiom and mechanism for political alignments (Alubo, 2004). In the conflict in view, ethnic identity was used in constructing claims to oil benefits. This confirms Ajala's (2008) argument that ethnic identity traverses the past and present experiences of a people, acting as a criterion of values. In the conflict, identity was also mobilized as an instrument for negotiating access to power, opportunities and resources. This fostered conflict as each group perceived a threat or challenge to their identity. As Zalewsky and Enloe (1995) opine that the need to claim or restore identity depends on whether there is or has been a threat to that identity.

Threats to identity often instigate a reaction from the threatened group to deal with the threat, which leads to the transformation of identity. According to Jega (2006: 6), identity transformation refers to the “continuous process, which suggests the changing roles of identities and the heightening and increasing magnitude and consequences of identity politics”. This corroborates Epstein's (1978) view that the thrust of identity is in continuity and change across contexts. Therefore, identities are manipulated to negotiate social conditions and to guide strategic political action in the pursuit of resources and opportunities. Omotola (2008: 77) points out that, “the centrality of ethnic identity is underscored by the fact that an ethnic group, defined as 'primarily the political community that inspires the belief in common identity' (Osaghae, 1994: 138), has propensities to change and take on new forms, depending on reactions to the various questions that are often generated when 'self meets the 'others'”. The potential of ethnic identity for “composition, decomposition and recomposition” (Owolabi, 2003: 10), makes it a tool for political manipulation and mobilization in conflicts.

The conflict between Eket and Ibeno people involved the mobilization of ethnic identity. Eket people claimed that they are true owner of the land (indigenes), while Ibeno people were 'settlers.' They maintained that their forebears ceded the hinterland to Ibeno people for fishing, and collected tributes from them (Udo, 1982). Ownership of land therefore makes them entitled to the benefits accruing from oil production in the area. The role of identity in local resource struggles became pronounced after the beginning of oil production, which shows how oil transforms identity and shapes conflict in oil producing communities (Leton, 2004). Agitation for local political autonomy by Ibeno people was also couched on identity construct. It was also “shaped by state level politics and local level contracting which had the net effect of destabilizing relations between Ibeno and Eket communities” (Leton, 2004: 2). The politics of local self-governance hinged on the legitimacy of particular land claims and land titles anchored on contested history of settlement and identity which gave rise to conflict. Ethnicity involves the mobilization of ethnic identity and differences to gain advantage in situations of competition, conflict or co-operation (Osaghae, 1994). Inequity in the distribution of resources engenders competition and rivalry, and the marginalized group often seeks ethnic alignments to redress the inequity. The conflict shows that identity boundaries are useful for group mobilization, and is rewarding in terms of access to resources (Nnoli, 1978). Ethnic identity is constructed to enable individuals organize themselves in ways that enhance their competitive efficiency in a situation where they perceive others as competitors for resources and positions (Nnoli, 1978). Ethnic identity is transformed into a resource for struggle and competition when it is mobilized in defending or securing resources and opportunities.

Conclusions

In analyzing conflict between Eket and Ibeno communities of Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria, this article explored identity mobilization and oil conflict. It shows the ways in which struggle for the benefits of oil among local people are steeped in identity politics, including definitions of belonging and exclusion. Identity is mobilized through discourses of autochthony and nativity. Scholars (Appadurai, 1996; Meyer & Geschiere, 1999) argue that the dialectics of flow and closure characteristic of globalization has accentuated the need to belong as well as fierce disagreement over claims of belonging. Discourses of autochthony may appear to be about defining the boundaries of the local, but they actually define access to the global. As Ceuppens and Geschiere (2005: 387), argue, “what is at stake is often less a closer definition of the local than a struggle over excluding others from access to new avenues of riches and power”. In the conflict discussed here, oil benefits are the objects of conflict. Oil is a conveyor of value in the global economy. Oil is located at the intersection of the local, the state and the global. It is “black gold', the bearer of powers and hopes, and expectations of unimaginable power” (Watts, 2005b: 113). Struggle for oil benefits connects local relations to global processes, invoking vigorous and continuous processes of exclusion. Ceuppens and Geschiere (2005) characterize this dynamic as the segmentary nature of autochthony discourse, which involves the constant redefinition of belonging at ever closer range. Autochthony is a fragile basis of resource claims which are shaped by the desire to defend access to resources, and not by any substantive form of difference. It is therefore always open to contest, adapting to changing situation and threats to its credibility (Arnaut, 2004).

This is why the discourse has such mobilizing power and very violent implications. It also explains the persistence and fierceness of conflicts in the Niger Delta, as the present example illustrates. The grotesque situation calls for increased ability to informally and formally enhance social control.

*Notes:*¹ A key informant mentioned that the people also manipulated occult forces to aid their struggle for compensations.

²This phrase was suggested by David Pratten, who read an earlier draft of the paper.

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