THE COMMODIFICATION OF VIOLENCE
IN THE NIGER DELTA

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Over the past four years, the Niger Delta has come to be widely portrayed as a quintessential site of oil-related conflict. The contemporary insurgency in the riverine area clearly emerges from historical and contemporary extraction of oil from that territory and the social relations that have come to facilitate it. These armed groups make direct claims on oil revenues – seeking contracts with private companies, payments from competing politicians, and control over the proceeds of trade in ‘bunkered’ (contraband) oil. Concurrently, an apparently mounting ‘criminality’, in the form of gang and cult activity in urban areas, unfolds alongside this insurgency. Competitive security provision for the oil industry and for rival politicians shapes a protection racket prosecuted by armed militias. While these ‘gangs’ simultaneously act as security agents for, as well as a threat to, the oil industry the key victims of the resulting violence are not foreign oil workers but the local resident populations – the Niger Delta’s so-called ‘oil minorities’.

The mounting violence in the Delta thus expresses a competitive struggle over land around industrial installations that is linked to both party politics and control over various aspects of the oil trade – whether licit or illicit. What remains contested are the various frames through which the violence is to be explained: competitive thuggery (as represented by various youth gangs fighting for dominance in enclaves); commodified insecurity of industrial installations (in the form of kidnappings for ransom); or regional sovereignty and resistance (as expressed by MEND – the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta, the predominant armed resistance movement at present). Militia activity taking each of these forms surfaced in the aftermath of a period of relatively non-violent resistance in the previous decade. Indeed, in the 1990s, the Niger Delta’s global expression was shaped particularly by the struggle of MOSOP (the Movement for the Survival of
the Ogoni People) and the formation of the Ijaw Youth Council (IYC),
alongside a range of other minority movements. Through the ‘judicial
murder’ of Ken Saro-Wiwa, and organised state violence against popular
resistance, peaceful protests against military rule, transnational oil industry
domination, and for minority recognition were largely crushed.

In the post 9-11 period, unpacking the competing representations of
mounting violence in the Delta is both a sensitive matter and crucial to
critiquing the foreign militarization of the Gulf of Guinea. The representation
of the Niger Deltan crisis in the global media is not unrelated to speculative
profiteering on oil futures markets, which is receiving increased criticism
from regulators. Consequently, although our main focus here is the
rise of contemporary militia activity in Rivers State and the competitive
political violence related to it, we wish to make a series of linked arguments
concerning the region’s representation. First, the spotlight on the state in
Nigerian academic analysis of the Delta crisis manifests broader disputes over
federal control and territorially-embedded resources (oil, agriculture, palm
oil, labour) in which the region’s social movements have been central actors.
Historically, these movements formed part of regional and tribally-identified
resistance groups that emerged through decolonization, manifesting the
crystallization of ethnicity under indirect rule. But focusing on the Nigerian
federal state tends to lead to inattention to global speculative exploitation and
tends to confirm the private oil industry’s own representation of the ‘risks’
it faces in the Niger Delta. The violent context permits the corporations to
make windfall profits, even while they claim it causes them ‘losses’. If one
were to employ, instead, the late Charles Tilly’s reading of the state as an
organised criminal syndicate, the Nigerian state’s role as facilitator of global
capitalist windfalls in the transnational oil market might receive the attention
it deserves.

We also wish to suggest that resistance against the authority of the
federal government echoes with contemporary global struggles (e.g. in
Latin America) for resource sovereignty, but in a form that is masked by the
crystallization of ethnicity as the lynchpin of socio-political organization.
Ethnicity was central to attempts to achieve consent under British indirect
rule, and is cemented today through various forms of decentralization
and ‘social capital’ promotion. This ‘compromised modernity’ has served
to obfuscate in the Western imagination the way in which contemporary
‘criminal activity’ and youth violence in the Delta is equally an expression
of what may be called late capitalism’s ‘anti-economy of social exclusion’.
The economic exclusion of marginalised youth as a result of state-capitalist
developmentalism and, more recently, of structural adjustment policies,
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also served to constitute not so much a reserve army as active armies of young people that have become involved in the competitive appropriation of oil wealth. These activities at times overlap with more ‘conventional’ criminal activity: theft, the drug trade, commercial sex work, and kidnappings for ransom. But the competition to provide ‘security’ for both legal and contraband oil extraction, while prompting periodic insecurity in the Niger Delta’s urban centres, has thus come to serve a functional purpose for global capital.

This provides a challenge to oppositional social movements in terms of how to represent militia activities in a context of rapid change, as even those purporting to act in the interests of Deltan sovereignty are drawn into turf wars and/or collaboration with political elites seeking to maintain a fragile grip on power. As one social movement leader put it following the 2003 elections (which an environmental rights organization referred to as an ‘armed struggle’),6 in the Nigerian climate the ability to lead security operations for politicians means ‘you can go from being a nobody to an everybody overnight’.7 The 2007 elections were less violent in the Delta (although not in the rest of the country) than in 2003, but in their immediate aftermath marauding armed militias, unhappy with token compensation for the ‘security services’ they had provided politicians, instilled fear throughout Port Harcourt. Against the ruling-class controlled media’s conscious ‘attempt to criminalise the struggles of the masses of the Niger Delta’, Godwin Frank, a Nigerian political and environmental rights activist, endorsed a Human Rights Watch report as follows:

demonstrating that the past and on-going violence in the Niger Delta in general and Port Harcourt in particular, is a specific outcome and an expression, albeit more virulent, of the dynamics of primitive accumulation by the Nigerian ruling class.
A situation in which various fractions, segments and alliances of a ruling class, consciously and decidedly cultivate lawlessness & general violence and promote atomization & destruction of organizations of the masses, in an attempt to assume vantage positions in the business of unbridled looting of public wealth. Our capitalists do not set up industries to compete amongst themselves for market share; they set up and foster gangster-organizations to compete for public-wealth. The size of their loot is proportional to the level of violence they are able to unleash on the masses. No doubt, we are in the vice-grip of VIOLENCE LAISSEZ-FAIRE!!8
Internationally, the layering of resistance activities over pre-existing ethnic militias, and disputes between rival ‘security providers’, have led to an official depiction from Washington, DC think-tanks of a criminalised, terror-prone Niger Delta. To challenge this discourse, this essay focuses on the factors that gave rise to the contemporary militias, showing how misleading it is to describe their activities in terms of ‘terror’. As we will see, the commodification of political violence, which has become increasingly widespread since the transition from military rule, may be depicted, ironically, as a kind of ‘democratisation of violence’. Support among youth for attacks against politicians reflect the general sense of disenfranchisement from the oil wealth that political elites are presumed to have monopolised. This distrust is palpable in communities throughout the Delta, as youth accuse chiefs of having ‘chopped’ (eaten) payments from the oil companies. Through competitive electoral processes that provide paid employment for youth excluded from extractive modernity, these same youths arm themselves, challenging any monopoly over force in the so-called ‘ungovernable’ creeks. Their activities thus further compromise and privatise the federal state, while facilitating their ability to make claims on political elites, even while their activities are at times harshly repressed. Locally, this results in violence and intimidation against civilian populations by both militias and state security forces, while creating a climate of alarm, which yields heightened risk-returns for multinational investors. An examination of these dynamics alongside an emerging territorial insurgency shows that to perceive the contemporary Niger Delta through the lens of terrorism further consolidates the ‘Slick Alliance’ between global capital and the Nigerian state that oppresses the Delta’s resident oil minorities.

SOCIAL EXCLUSION ON THE NIGER DELTA

The Niger Delta region, located in the southernmost region of Nigeria, encompasses some 70,000 sq. km, nine states, and a population of over 28 million. The predominant sites of petroleum extraction, where densely forested, maze-like wetlands shape the geography surrounding oil installations, are Rivers, Delta and Bayelsa states. Ethno-linguistically there may be over 100 dialects spoken in the Delta, from at least five language groups, and in the riverine area villages within 15 minutes of one another may speak different ones. Together, the population of these states is estimated at close to 10 million. Neighbouring Akwa Ibom State to the east of Rivers State is less conflictual, not only because of the particular history of the Ibibio people that are that state’s main inhabitants but also because the oil installations there are primarily in the deep offshore. The residents of Delta, Rivers
and Bayelsa states, in contrast, have mounted organised resistance against government and the oil industry, with the Ogoni inhabitants of Rivers State prominent internationally as a result of the movement led by Saro-Wiwa until his execution in 1995.

The contribution of oil wealth to the Nigerian polity makes clear why this region is of key strategic significance to the country’s economy and stability, and also suggests why Nigeria exemplifies the ‘resource curse’. Between 2002-4, oil revenues accounted for about 50 per cent of Nigeria’s GDP; almost 80 per cent of all government revenues; and 97 per cent of its foreign exchange earnings. This stands in sharp contrast with the region’s deepening socio-economic problems. Indeed, in Port Harcourt, unemployment may be as high as 30 per cent – a reflection of the income effects of a boom and bust, enclave industry. As the prominent political economist Okechukwu Ibeanu details in a recent study:

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… While 76 per cent of Nigerian children attend primary school, in the Niger Delta the figure drops appallingly to between 30 and 40 per cent.

The leading industrial operators in the petroleum sector are Shell, Chevron-Texaco, Total, and Agip in conjunction with the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation, as well as Exxon Mobil in the offshore of Akwa Ibom State. As the ‘first-mover’ in the Nigerian oil industry, Shell’s influence on socio-political relations throughout the country is palpable. Given the relative absence of federal infrastructure in the Delta, Shell is at times a de facto state in the region. The social history of the Nigerian oil industry is rooted in the regional identity and territorial struggles of the late colonial and early independence period in the Niger Delta. Oil explorations were initiated in the 1930s by Shell, with the first successful well drilled near Oloibiri in today’s Bayelsa state in 1956. The ‘minorities’ of the Niger Delta were already identified as a marginalised set of social groups in the period leading up to decolonisation. Six years after Nigerian independence in 1960, the continuing regional tensions led to the Biafran Civil War in which the Igbo east attempted to secede. The war partially concerned the control of oil-producing regions and their associated revenues, the British siding with the Nigerian Federation and the French with Biafra, while Shell surreptitiously fuelled both sides.
This period also saw the emergence of sovereignty movements in the Niger Delta, especially among the Ijaw. In January 1966 Isaac Adaka Boro, then a university student in the east, led a revolt and guerrilla movement against the Nigerian state (referred to as the 12-day revolution), proclaiming a Niger Delta People’s Republic. With a hundred and fifty-nine volunteers, Boro established the first post-independence ethnic militia in the Niger Delta. The echo of his movement figured in the ongoing regional pressures for an autonomous Rivers State, ultimately established in May 1967. As the new state was seen as strengthening the Southern minorities vis-à-vis the Ibo southeast in the federation, it was among the factors prompting Igbo/Biafran secession. Boro’s legacy remains central to Ijaw national identity and contemporary Deltaan resistance movements, in particular in their armed variety. Boro’s army, the Niger Delta Volunteer Force (NDVF), resonates in the names subsequently taken by today’s militias in Rivers State.

The period after the civil war saw a series of military dictatorships in Nigeria, with a brief period of democracy in the Second Republic which, alongside broader global downturns and the impact of structural adjustment policies, ravaged the Nigerian economy in the 1980s and ’90s. The Niger Delta witnessed deepening socio-environmental degradation, marginalisation and impoverishment. Particularly notable was the infrastructural isolation of the rural and riverine villages to which roads, water systems and electricity were not extended despite numerous ‘plans’ by federal development commissions. This context was worsened by ecological degradation resulting from the oil industry’s presence, including ubiquitous unprotected pipelines and huge surface flares of associated gas. An agrarian and fishing socio-economy has persisted in riverine communities accessible only by boat, although there is an ongoing outmigration from them into sporadic oil enclave employment.16 In the urban areas, an acute housing shortage has led to the springing up of squatter/slum settlements along the waterfronts.17 A context of ‘relative deprivation’ is therefore evident in both the Delta’s isolated swampland communities and its urban slums, alongside the highly securitised, gated residential facilities of the oil industry.

COLONIALISM, ETHNICITY AND COMMODIFICATION

The Delta was a site of global resource extraction – of slaves, rubber and palm oil – long before petroleum was discovered. Palm oil lent its name to the ‘Oil Rivers’ by which the Delta fluvial system came to be known. The slave trade under Portuguese and Dutch control, from the 15th to the 19th century, was followed by British ‘maxim gun’ diplomacy and its translation into legal relations of commercial dominance.18 Overseas commerce was established
with the emergence of Niger Deltan city states in the 18th and 19th centuries. As Peter Ekeh has argued, the involvement of the local population in the trans-Atlantic slave trade was among the key factors strengthening the role of kinship/tribal identification as a central provider of human security, while central state war-making was directly associated with predatory violence against the local population.\textsuperscript{19}

The bone of contention between the traditional political leadership and the colonial state was the local rulers’ commercial and political rights, which were threatened by the economic activities of the Royal Niger Company.\textsuperscript{20} Stronger settlements developed a protection racket on the waterways in the form of the \textit{comey}, a security tax on the movement of goods – not altogether unlike the money paid by oil companies for security today.\textsuperscript{21} A century after the formal abolition of slavery, the establishment, expansion and consolidation of the Southern Nigerian Protectorate between 1900 and 1913 – which incorporated the Southern Nigerian ‘Oil Rivers Protectorate’ established in 1885 – was accomplished by brute force using protectorate troops and police.

Under British and Royal Niger Company control, local merchants were able to trade with other local merchants only by smuggling, with interesting parallels to the bunkering of oil today. But although Britain subjugated the Niger Delta City States militarily, it did not destroy their chieftaincy institutions. Traditional political institutions were adapted under the policy of Indirect Rule which shaped the contemporary politicisation of cultural ties, through the promotion of the warrant chiefs of the colonial era. Today, oil industry ‘host community’ policies reproduce these localised, divisive relations through competition for development funds and promises of labour and security contracts, the price of which is determined by the ‘value’ of the oil installations of which a given village is deemed the ‘landlord’.\textsuperscript{22} Chiefs claim compensation from the multinationals for oil prospecting activities in the community, based on a provision in the Land Use Act which states that compensation for surface rights over land acquired for oil activities is to be made to Traditional Rulers to disburse as they deem fit on behalf of their communities.\textsuperscript{23} Such practices made certain chieftaincies and territorial claims highly lucrative and contentious; both state institutions and oil companies treated chiefs as their primary interlocutors with the local communities. The geographical boundaries between the oil communities have likewise become deeply contested, with oil industry mapping and naming practices leading to violent conflicts.

Since the mid-1990s, the youths of communities in Rivers State have aggressively demanded the dismantling of hierarchical traditional leadership
structures in favour of more horizontal arrangements. The companies, in turn, have been compelled to make payments to the youths, who have accused the chiefs of corruption, for access to their facilities or to ensure the security of their operations. Due to the gulf between traditional authorities and the youth who are the ‘security’ providers, Community Development Councils (CDCs) – a revolving governance structure functioning alongside the councils of chiefs – are of increasing salience. In certain cases, the CDCs have been taken over by youths following major intra-community conflicts in which armed groups have expelled the traditional authorities.

The establishment of new states and Local Government Areas in the Nigerian Federation has also led to complaints over unclearly defined boundaries. Although intended to serve as a route toward sub/minority group and local participation in development, this both reflects and prompts inter-ethnic clashes over the ownership of oil-fields, farmlands and waterways. In some of these conflicts, state security forces watch while violence rages, especially where intelligence reports indicate that the state’s business interests are not threatened. This creates civil insecurity that has in turn stimulated the rapid privatisation of security. Prior to 1999, under a military government in which the state was very much ‘a force to be feared’, most neighbourhoods in Port Harcourt organised self-defence or vigilante groups. Over time, these private policing initiatives became counter-productive, as small arms provided for collective security resurfaced in intra-community disagreements, ultimately exacerbating violence. This occurred in the 1999 democratic process, though in a mild form, due to the presence of the military which was there to facilitate the transition to democratic rule.

But what has emerged since 1999 is a political culture where elites win power through violent competition. Competitive electoral politics has taken on a ruthless character in which it is assumed that the winner takes all. Central to this is the use of militias by the political parties, either as part of their campaign cadres or directly to control the electoral outcome. Concurrently, and despite the formal outlawing of company ‘standby’ payments to community youths, the employment of local and private security forces by the industry remains commonplace, contributing to a protection racket where territorially-dominant armed groups act as both security and threat to industry.

The frequent vandalising of oil facilities, the opposition to construction of new facilities, the blockades of oil rigs, the kidnapping of local and international personnel, and the attacks on and shut-downs of facilities have led to arrests, the detention and trial of activists (sometimes on trumped-up charges) and the deployment of military forces. These deployments are
reminiscent of the military regimes of Babangida and Abacha, when forces were sent in against a variety of protesters and/or ‘criminals’, leading to the destruction of villages and the deaths of unarmed civilians.28 The military’s approach to the Niger Delta has been described as ‘maximum force at the slightest hint of insecurity’.29 A series of security operations with names like ‘Fire for Fire’ and ‘Operations Flush 1, 2, 3’ are examples of high-profile security initiatives. Although these demonstrate the ongoing securitised, repressive attitude of the state, the increasing availability of small arms and attacks contribute to the ‘terrorist’ discourse employed by security-affiliated think-tanks.30 It is in this context that the proliferation of ethnic militia groups in Rivers State needs to be understood. As we shall now see, uncovering the origins of this discloses the conjoint fuelling of armed groups by politicians, oil industry security contracts, and the trade in bunkered oil.

VIOLENCE AND ITS REPRESENTATION

The ethnic militias in the area surrounding Nigeria’s ‘oil capital’, Port Harcourt, the capital of Rivers State, are rooted in competitive social relations arising from both electoral contests and the trade in contraband oil. The dispute between the Niger Delta People’s Volunteer Force (NDPVF) led by Asari Dukubo, and the Niger Delta Vigilante (NDV) led by Ateke Tom, gained international notoriety in 2003-4. In reaction to the turf-warfare and commodified violence that increasingly characterised their dispute and various others, the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) emerged with the aim of reappropriating and reshaping the public representation of armed resistance in the Delta.

In examining the dynamics shaping both the rise of NDV and NDPVF and the subsequent emergence of MEND, global and ‘local’ perceptions of resistance and protest against industry are highly salient. In 2002-3, many residents of the Niger Delta riverine and peri-urban area, including women and youth, would refer to any shut-down of an installation as ‘violence’. Presumably they had adopted the corporate language that describes as ‘violent’ all facility occupations. This was particularly notable at Shell’s Women’s Peacebuilding Forum in Yenagoa in Bayelsa State in 2003, attended by hundreds of women from that company’s host communities. Ironically, this went hand in hand with a tendency to place responsibility for ‘social breakdown’ in the Niger Delta crisis on women as mothers at the Forum. The internalization of the equation between popular protest against the oil industry and the criminalisation of resistance has not only been accepted by the courts, but by the affected populations themselves.

The violence between Asari- and Ateke-affiliated militias in the Port
Harcourt area reflects the range of interests involved in the Delta’s ‘protection business’. Port Harcourt and Warri are the two key oil towns in Nigeria. While Warri had been a central site of inter-ethnic violence for various decades, especially pronounced in the late 1990s and leading to massive displacement in 2003, armed conflict in Port Harcourt emerged particularly in the democratic transition period, with 2003 a major watershed. The rivalry between Asari and Ateke may be best understood as a conflict between rival gangs seeking territorial control, a form of ‘competitive thuggery’. But both Asari and Ateke were also providers of ‘local security’ services, in contests for chieftaincy stools where territorial authority entailed access to oil industry payments. Their ability to gain adherents among a range of youth results from the widespread disaffection of youth gangs in the slums alongside the relatively advantaged classes drafted into increasingly violent cult fraternities on university campuses. In wrangling over chieftaincy titles and political posts these alienated youth were also exploited by those desperate for power.

Asari Dokubo, from a politically important family of the Kalabari area, and Ateke Tom, from Okrika, both belong to clans with significant commercial and political histories in Rivers State and the Niger Delta generally. In the constitution of an Okrika community defence force, those charged with prosecuting an ongoing rivalry with the neighbouring Eleme clan over the land base of the Port Harcourt Refinery were known as the Bush Boys/Peacemakers, while Ateke was first armed as the leader of the young men charged by the Okrika Divisional Council of Chiefs with security of the community’s mainland. But following the height of Okrika’s conflict with Eleme, Ateke was accused of employing violence and intimidation against his own community and was, for a time, expelled from Okrika by the Bush Boys. The latter would later become allies of Asari. While Ateke and Asari had served as local security in these areas, in the 2003 elections their militias came to be patronised by the ruling PDP (People’s Democratic Party) under Governor Odili. Their increasing access to arms before, during and after the election, was among the factors that allowed them to compete for and assert control over sites in the contraband oil trade in the Cawthorne Channel area. It was with the support of PDP state representatives, whose central position in funding the violence of the 2003-4 period is now under investigation by the Rivers State Truth and Reconciliation Commission, that Ateke’s position as a regional gang leader solidified. He was also employed to support leadership factions in the Kalabari area to which Asari Dokubo was opposed, another key contributor to their dispute.

Asari Dokubo’s rise to prominence was similarly associated with clan and political sponsorship. But both his relatively advantaged class position
and the broader movement of the Ijaw Youth Council (IYC) that he led from 2002 placed him among Niger Deltan ‘civil society’ in a way that set him apart from Ateke. He was installed as president of the IYC in 2002, in elections orchestrated by Governor Odili and marked by a heavy state security presence. Established as a politically-autonomous branch of the Ijaw nationalist movement at Kaiama in Bayelsa State in 1998, the IYC was considered an organic social movement and highly democratic. The organisation’s founding document, the Kaiama declaration, protested the economic exclusion and political marginalisation of the Ijaw by the state and transnational oil companies. The PDP’s role in IYC elections tarnished the legitimacy of Asari’s presidency, however, and a portion of the IYC leadership affiliated with Deltan social justice organisations distanced themselves from him.

Although Asari later came to represent more militant tendencies in the IYC, he was reportedly not present at Kaiama in 1998. But by 2004 his ability to command a range of Deltan youth brought him international notoriety. Coupled with his identity as a convert to Islam, the international media coverage squared well with the discourse concerning threats to global freedom and energy security that accompanied the US invasion of Iraq. The portrayal of Asari as a warlord leading young African men toting sophisticated weapons conformed to neo-conservative ‘failed state’ perspectives on ‘chaos’ in West Africa.

Partially due to the criticism from sovereigntist branches in the IYC, Asari disassociated himself from Odili and the PDP following the elections. His militia adopted the name the Niger Delta Peoples Volunteer Force (NDPVF), informed by Isaac Boro’s movement of the 1960s, while Ateke’s militia became the Niger Delta Vigilante. But concurrent with Asari’s increasing criticism of the political elite and the Nigerian State, his conflict with Ateke mounted and took on the characteristics of a turf war. This came to a head in November of 2003 in a major clash at Buguma, the Kalabari capital and Asari’s hometown.

The heightening of the violence between the two leaders must also be understood in the context of struggles to control the profits from the bunkered oil trade. Contraband oil bunkering in the Niger Delta has a complex history. Cartels of oil bunkerers initially established armed gangs to patrol creeks during operations, ward off non-associated state security, and escort the product to the high seas. They tapped directly into the oil industry’s pipelines or wellheads, connecting the pipes to large barges hidden where the mangrove forest provides cover. The ‘asphyxiating and unfriendly terrain comprising thick mangrove forests and swamps’, criss-crossed by
creeks, rivers and canals, is a unique feature of the Niger Delta that makes it possible for illegal bunkerers to evade state control. The industry has made a concerted effort to mark bunkered oil as ‘illegal’ (see for instance, the website legaloil.com), especially as it is exchanged on global spot markets alongside ‘legitimately’ extracted oil. As recently described in the Financial Times: ‘Smaller ships ferry back and forth to fill up tankers on high seas. The tankers often come with guns, exchanged as part payment for oil. The oil is then transported to third parties, often to refineries in Central Asia and eastern Europe, which buy at a discount to market price, refine the oil and sell it on the world market’.

By 2003, the leaders of the militias had become both marketers of ‘security’ and bunkerers, since they had acquired the infrastructure and technical skills to operate autonomously. This is a direct assertion of local ‘resource control’, reminiscent of struggles for commercial power in the late 19th century. Various armed groups, including Asari’s NDPVF, the FNDC (Federated Niger Delta Communities) of the Western Delta – a region encompassing Western Bayelsa and Delta States – and the currently prominent MEND, came to employ a sovereigntist discourse to describe the trade. Local militias’ success at bunkering derives from better organisation, superior equipment, more funds and growing linkages with state political actors.

With the rise of NDV and NDPVF, drug gangs in Port Harcourt quickly aligned with one of the two militia groups to consolidate their trade zones. Consequently the Asari and Ateke dispute came to implicate gangs located in the urban slums, as well as cult groups that had arisen in the college/university system. In the case of both gangs and cults, a quest for social mobility motivates participation in organised crime, encompassing drug dealing, robberies, car theft, and extortion. Despite an absence of stable hierarchies or long-established leaders capable of controlling all of these activities, the cult groups – whose leaders are paid to provide security protection for drug traffickers – have managed to direct the drug trade, carving the metropolis of Port Harcourt into distinct territories.

As a result of the increasing violence between their adherents, which affected the broad Port Harcourt area, various domestic and international NGOs were enlisted to ‘resolve’ the Asari-Ateke conflict. The mediation included meetings held outside the Delta (for instance in Jos, Plateau State) to which large numbers of young men from rival militias were bussed in. The push to resolve the Asari and Ateke rivalry coincided with Asari’s distancing himself from Odili, openly critiquing the Nigerian political class and the state, and his assumption of the mantle of Deltan freedom fighter. It was reportedly through the advice of some of Asari’s critics in the IYC
leadership that he moved toward an anti-marginalisation platform. From the perspective of Ijaw youth, the resort to arms among one branch of the movement both anticipated future repression and led to the development of a more militant consciousness. While Asari was portrayed in the global media as a tough gang leader, within the Delta he came to be seen as an important freedom fighter. Long before his arrest on treason charges in 2005, which led to a huge groundswell of support for him in the Delta, he had started to employ the language of anti-apartheid movements in South Africa to describe the Deltan struggle. As he put it in an interview in July 2003: ‘Rivers and Bayelsa are all Bantustans’.

Following his release from federal detention, and in contrast to his position in the 2003 elections, in 2007 Asari in fact offered to mediate in the conflict between Ateke and other Port Harcourt gang leaders.

Unlike the rise of the NPDVF and the NDV, MEND’s leadership structure is less defined and perhaps better understood in terms of Ike Okonta’s description as ‘an idea rather than an organisation in the formal sense of the word’. MEND emerged in 2005-6 as a kind of umbrella for a dispersed collection of armed groups. Following attacks on facilities, MEND would claim responsibility, citing as causes the marginalisation of the Delta and its youth, the lack of productive employment, and the deterioration of the ecology of the region’s fishing and farming subsistence base – in essence exclusion from both the formal oil economy and its agrarian alternative.

With regard to the attacks on oil facilities attributed to MEND, conflicting accounts of its activities demonstrate the crucial and sometimes hazy role of MEND’s spokespeople in shaping public perception of a Niger Deltan insurgency. An event that occurred as this essay went to press highlights the significance of such divergent accounts for the representation of MEND as a broader social movement. Reports of an attack on the Bonga Offshore platform on June 19, 2008, the first deep offshore project in Nigeria, Shell-operated and highly strategic, prompted a flurry of international wire coverage of the Delta that led to a surge in prices. It also prompted fears that apparently secure, deep (i.e. on the high-seas) offshore installations could be as vulnerable to attack by militant groups as the onshore. But a week after the reported attack, a story in a Nigerian daily with roots in the Delta region, the Vanguard, offered an alternative account linking it to a labour dispute between Shell and its private security contractors:

The alleged militant attack on the floating production storage and offloading vessel led to the shut-down of 225,000 per day crude oil output and rise in world price of crude. An American, Capt Jack
Stone who works for an oil services company was alleged to have been kidnapped but later released. But a new twist has entered into the story, bringing with it an argument on who actually carried out the attack. Authoritative sources told Saturday Vanguard that the attack and shut-in of the flow station were actually carried out from within the vessel, and not by MEND. “It was not a militant action at all”, the sources revealed, saying that the incident occurred when about 55 security personnel who are staff of a private security outfit operated by a retired senior military officer forcefully shut the floating station in protest of Shell’s maltreatment. Their anger, the military source continued, was that for the past three months, in spite of having worked under severe and dangerous conditions to secure the multi-billion dollars investment, Shell refused to pay them their salaries. MEND maintained they had attacked the facility to prove (they) have the capacity to attack anywhere in the Niger Delta to press for the release of its leader, Henry Okah as well as fight for the development of the Niger Delta region. “Shell thinks that we are fools. The company sacked a lot of Niger-Deltans from their employment when we are asking for more jobs for our people under the guise of restructuring. But the truth is that they are taking their production off shore, where they think that the military will protect them, that is part of the reason we went there to tell them that no place is safe for them in the Niger-Delta except they realize that they have to give jobs to our people and provide us with development incentives. We are telling them that we know their game plan and that it will not work.”

The parties involved in providing these conflicting accounts of the Bonga incident include not only MEND and the former military – now privately-operated contractors to the neoliberalised state – but also Shell itself. The location of the Bonga field, offshore facing the contentious city of Warri, evokes memories of the ‘evacuation’ of the area facing Bonga by Chevron in 2003 during inter-communal election violence related to conflict over Local Government Area boundaries. The airlift of the residents by Chevron received the US Secretary of State’s ‘Corporate Award for Excellence’ in November 2003. This evacuation occurred less than a year after a series of sit-ins at Chevron installations in the same area, where women residents of the riverine oil industry ‘host communities’ threatened to disrobe on a Chevron platform. These women’s protests gained international media sympathy and evoked fears among the multinationals of another Ogoni-
style ‘peaceful’ uprising, much more likely to win the sympathy of global audiences than armed youth attacks. Five years later many of the ‘evacuated’ communities remain largely abandoned.

‘DEMOCRATISED VIOLENCE’?

Much contemporary analysis of violence in the Delta locates the root of the region’s insurgency exclusively in competition for the rewards of oil bunkering, attributing the motivation for conflict to economic-resource predation and ‘greed’. True, ‘resource predation’ is the rebel organisations’ essential means of finance: the payment of operational allowances to combatants, the running costs of the camps, the payment of instructors and the purchase of weapons by NDPVF and NDV – all these are provided out of the proceeds of oil bunkering. But none of this accounts for the emergence of the NDPVF and the NDV. The ‘resource predation’ interpretation perceives their activities as ‘organised crime’, obscuring how militancy derives from grievances against the state and capital.

Since 2003, armed youth groups and militias in Rivers State have rapidly evolved from appendages of Delta political life to major political institutions in their own right. This was a consequence of the political elites’ inability to control the militia leaders, a central contradiction of the commodification of violence. In part, this followed from the growing financial capacity of the groups to acquire sophisticated weapons on their own, as the presence of a small arms market in the region escalated inter-militia conflicts. The deepening contradiction assumed the form of splits and the formation of new alliances and counter-alliances between armed groups, either to secure compensation from the state or to fight among themselves to secure the highest bidder in the volatile democratic process. While this has contributed to weakening traditional and formal forms of authority, it does not fully explain the erosion of social deference to these authorities.

The ability to use arms also shapes a locally-mediated protection racket, which is now central to the political economy of both violence and oil industry security in the Delta. Although militia attacks serve as a major threat to extractive security, they have in fact been a boon to oil traders and security-operation profiteers, allowing speculative accumulation by corporate insiders. This dynamic is partially determined by the complex socio-cultural geography of the riverine area, which facilitates a regionalization of violence distinct from other parts of Nigeria. The goal of a violence-free Delta remains elusive both because the criminal acts are endorsed, rationalised and defended on the terrain of party politics, creating incentives for the ongoing reproduction of violence, and also because a local market has
emerged in security/insecurity. The dynamic is shaped not only by ongoing rivalries for commercial dominance, control over territory, and domination of ‘protection rackets’ for politicians and bunkerers, but also by relations of subjugation that in fact encourage the rise of ‘illicit’ trade in the first place.

Whatever its representation, the trade amounts to a just claim against ‘accumulation by dispossession’. Relations of subjugation in the Niger Delta are in part a legacy of the trans-Atlantic trade and colonial rule, but are also shaped by the particular properties of oil as a territorially-embedded resource. The way the oil industry allocates the benefits from oil extraction to local actors and communities as ‘hosts’ to installations has served to further divide and rule the Delta’s ‘oil minorities’ and has given rise to groups of armed youth now deeply involved in commodified practices, both political and commercial. Given these circumstances, Godwin Frank’s closing words concerning the 2007 post-election violence are worth noting:

All said and done, what is most important to note is that we are at a cross-road; either we reclaim and rebuild our mass-based democratic organizations, position them for a focused struggle for a new and better society, or we nose-dive into unmitigated barbarism! Social history is never static! It is becoming increasingly clear that retrogression is gaining an upper hand over progression!! Let’s act now!!!

As the violence perpetrated by some of the gangs and cults does indeed generate fear among the population, it partially legitimates the ongoing presence of both state and private security forces, which in turn reproduces relations of insecurity and distrust. Significantly, the nonviolent demands for reform made in the 2001 women’s war against Chevron were considerably more threatening to that company’s global reputation than the activities of marauding youth militias, of which the multinationals in the Delta now come to present themselves as victims.

NOTES


2 C. Ake, Political Ethnicity and State-Building in Nigeria in Global Convulsions: Race, Ethnicity and Nationalism at the End of the Twentieth Century, Albany:

3 For instance, Tilly writes: ‘But consider the definition of a racketeer as someone who creates a threat and then charges for its reduction. Governments’ provision of protection, by this standard, often qualifies as racketeering. To the extent that the threats against which a given government protects its citizens are imaginary or are consequences of its own activities, the government has organized a protection racket. Since governments themselves commonly simulate, stimulate, or even fabricate threats of external war and since the repressive and extractive activities of governments often constitute the largest current threats to the livelihoods of their own citizens, many governments operate in essentially the same ways as racketeers. There is, of course, a difference: Racketeers, by the conventional definition, operate without the sanctity of governments’. Charles Tilly, ‘War Making and State Making as Organized Crime’, in P.B. Evans, D. Reuschemeyer and T. Skocpol, eds., *Bringing the State Back In*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985


7 Personal interview, August 2003.


9 That this remains necessary, when various of our colleagues have been
making the point for over a decade, only underlines the importance of social construction to shaping military intervention in the Niger Delta. See Ike Okonta’s 2000 article: ‘The Lingering Crisis in Nigeria’s Niger Delta and Suggestions for a Peaceful Resolution’ available from http://www.cdd.org.uk.


16 A speedboat ride from these communities to Port Harcourt, Yenago or Warri may take 2 hours and cost upwards of $10 US dollars for a one-way trip. By market boat, the trip takes some days.


20 Under the British, those successful rulers most likely to assert their commercial dominance versus imperial interests were also displaced: the defeated, deposed or subjugated included King Jaja of Opobo.
THE COMMODIFICATION OF VIOLENCE IN THE NIGER DELTA


27 Private security of this kind is in fact sanctioned through the Voluntary Principles on Security and Human Rights, a joint US-UK initiative to which various oil companies and NGOs are signatories.

28 A highly criticized case was the destruction of Umuechem in 1990, in which numerous unarmed civilians were killed by the military following Shell’s request for government protection from protesters. Among the most notable of such military invasions in the past 10 years was the sacking and burning of the town of Odi in Bayelsa State in 1999.


Western analysts emphasize Asari’s identity as Muslim and his links to Libya, where he spent some time. His followers are not Muslim, as the Ijaw population largely practices Christianity or traditional religions. Nevertheless, his adoption of the title Alhaji and later Mujahadid served dominant Western anti-Islamic discourse.


As demonstrated in press coverage of the Soku gas plant, near previous Asari strongholds, the oil industry ‘tolerates’ bunkering as part of its concern with the security of its installations.

Dele Cole, ‘Why Choke the Goose’, *Financial Times*, 24 June 2008. Cole is a businessman and politician from Rivers State who was a founding member of the PDP and a former special adviser to President Obasanjo.

The first university fraternity, Pyrates, was founded in 1952 by Wole Soyinka and others at the University of Ibadan with the objectives of promoting social awareness and fighting social injustice. However, the intentions of these fraternities shifted as they spread to other Nigerian universities. Contests for influence between fraternities since the 1980s have resulted in violent clashes in which small arms are freely used.


It should be noted that Asari’s current position has been criticised, as some see his criticism of arrested MEND leader Henry Okah as seeking to curry favour with the federal government.


MEND’s kidnappings of oil workers in the Niger Delta have similar purposes. Although MEND’s hostages have generally been released unharmed, an August 2006 kidnapping ended tragically, with 10 youth involved in negotiating the release of a Nigerian worker – who also died in the incident – gunned down by the Nigerian military. These deaths received minimal international coverage. As a colleague in the oil town of Warri wrote in a personal communication: ‘The question we are now asking is, would the youths have been fired at if the rescued Shell official was white?’.


Interviews with oil industry staff 2003 and 2006. MEND’s emergence in the Western Delta followed the marginalisation of these well-publicised women’s occupations of Chevron’s Escravos facilities in 2002. The villagers’ ongoing calls for resettlement and for fulfilment of these agreements were ignored and in February 2005 another protest launched from Ugborodo bordering on Chevron installations was answered brutally, with at least one protester killed. See ‘Chevron Nigeria – Assault on Protestors’ available at http://www.amnestyusa.org. Due partially to the evacuation, and conveniently for the company, Chevron’s community development commitments made in response to the women’s protests were not carried out and depopulation of the villages meant that local protests could hardly be sustained over time. In a public forum in 2006, a Chevron official stated that the company had no reason to fulfil development commitments made with the Warri women protesters since ‘the communities’ had not fulfilled their end of the bargain – to provide a peaceful operating environment.


But it must be noted that these incentives toward the reproduction of violence serve not only those who fight. Indeed, an entire ‘conflict’ industry of peace-making and peace-keeping specialists, Nigerian and expatriate, has emerged to ‘resolve and re-mediate’ the bloodshed, who would clearly be out of a job if the crisis was allayed, while, as noted at the outset, the violence has also been a boon to oil traders and security-operation profiteers.

See note 8.