

The Niger Delta Wetland, Illegal Oil Bunkering and Youth Identity Politics in Nigeria

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Introduction

Between 2005 and 2009, almost an entire generation of youth in the oil-rich Niger Delta area in Nigeria took up military weapons against the Nigerian state and multi-national oil corporations. They were supposedly agitating for self-determination and a fair treatment of the oil-producing communities by the Nigerian federal government. In a frantic bid to gain attention from an indifferent global corporate world and an impervious local political class, the angry youth blew up oil pipelines and sabotaged crude oil production in the region; kidnapped and took hostage foreign expatriates working for transnational oil companies; and bombed government offices and facilities. Other activities by the militants included extra-legal acts such as illegal oil bunkering (oil theft), the killing of both military and police personnel, and many other unnameable acts which have not yet been captured in extant studies on the Delta crisis. Unsettled by the restiveness, the major multinational oil companies operating in the Niger Delta feverishly withdrew staff from the oil fields and called off production, reducing national output by about 750,000 barrels per day, which at the time was roughly half of the nation's daily output (Douglas et al.).

The upsurge and spread of violence triggered by the angry youth in the Niger Delta, particularly between 2006 and 2009, have generated a fairly dense body of critique. While views have differed on the real roots of the armed insurgency in the Delta, scholars generally point to the prolonged history of structural violence in the region, where oil-bearing communities have been denied the social and economic benefits resulting from the huge wealth generated from the exploitation of their natural resources.¹ Indeed, as Boyloaf, one of the leading commanders of the armed youth movement in the Delta, puts it, Nigeria is a funny country “where those who do not know how the creeks look like own oil blocks, yet you have those who live in the creeks, earn their living and die in the creeks, but do not know what oil blocks look like.”² Although oil production has been going on in the Delta region for more than five decades, the people in that area live in chronic poverty and unthinkable social and economic conditions, which had already been denounced by

Ken Saro-Wiwa in his fight for Ogoni rights. Nigeria's gigantic oil industry currently produces between 2.5/8 million barrels of crude oil per day and "earns N42.3 billion (\$282 million) daily from crude oil as the price on the international market continues to soar" (Yusuf). With an annual income of about USD 40 billion, it is estimated that the Delta region may have produced oil worth at least USD 800 billion since drilling and commercial production began there in 1956. But for most communities in the Niger Delta, the discovery of oil has amounted to nothing but "a tale of terror and tears" (Watts, "Petro-Violence" 196). The corporate good of the multi-national oil corporations and the rent-seeking interests of the Nigerian state have completely overwhelmed any humanistic considerations of the welfare of the local populations and their environment. The general outcome for local populations has been colossal misfortune marked by mass poverty and the dearth of basic social infrastructure such as clean water, paved roads, electricity, schools, and a reliable health-care system. According to Kenneth Omeje, it is estimated that 70% of the indigenes in the Niger Delta live in the rural areas under very deplorable conditions (*High Stakes* 32). In 2011, a journalist from the *Daily Independent* declared that youth unemployment in Oloibori alone, the first village where oil drilling began in 1958, is running at 50% (Brown). It is this persistence of economic hardships and social isolation, coupled with relentless environmental degradation that triggered violence in the region between 2005 and 2009. And what emerged was an exceptionally brutal brand of youth culture in which, as Michael Peel notes, "weapons, spiritual belief, ideology and mercantilism combined to such a deadly effect" (13).

My aim in this paper, then, is not to rehash an already familiar narrative of the crisis in the Delta, but to intervene in the Niger Delta debate by offering a critique that focuses squarely on the strategies of resistance and agency by the militant youth in the Delta region between 2006 and 2009, thus triangulating the links between precarity, marginalized youth, and identity formation in present-day Nigeria. I am interested in making a connection between social and economic marginalization in the Delta, on the one hand, and the politics of youth violence on the other. Although some scholars have already reflected on the link between the Niger Delta conflict and youth,⁴ no one has conducted a nuanced youth-centred analysis of the repertoires of violence deployed by the angry youth in the Delta, particularly in the larger context of young people's struggle for social justice and economic opportunities within specific socio-economic and political conditions. This is in spite of the fact that the Niger Delta youth, although not the main instigators of the conflict in the region, were the main agents of action in the crisis. When and where references have been made to the Niger Delta youth in relation to the conflict in the region, it is often as casualties of an unending generational curse.⁵ This argument is reminiscent of a familiar rhetoric in African cultural studies that often frames African youth as a disempowered and lost generation undergoing endless suffering and

exploitation and hence devoid of political subjectivity and agency.⁶ These kinds of arguments ignore the ways in which youth are increasingly being recognised as significant social actors within given socio-economic, political, and cultural circumstances.⁷ As a diverse social category across time and space, youth are powerful and dynamic social actors, experiencing as well as responding to both the local and the global forces whirling around them.

In this article, therefore, I am concerned to explore two key aspects of the armed insurgency that took place in the Niger Delta between 2006 and 2009, especially as a way of signposting the agency and subjectivity of youth as non-state actors in the midst of inauspicious social and economic conditions. Particularly, I want to examine the unique politics around the use of space (the Niger Delta wetland) and illegal oil bunkering (oil theft) in the context of the armed insurgency that took place in the Delta. Although kidnapping was a significant aspect of the repertoires of youth violence in the Niger Delta crisis, a fairly detailed study on that aspect has already been completed in a recent study,⁸ so I have chosen instead to focus on the spatial politics and the economy of survival as articulated by the militant youth in the context of the armed insurgency.⁹ In the next two segments, I examine closely the specific ways in which armed youth deployed the Niger Delta wetland and illegal oil bunkering as powerful instruments of both individual and collective struggles for social and economic justice. I conclude by reflecting broadly on the moral economy of subjective violence in young people's struggles for socio-economic empowerment in modern-day Africa.

The Niger Delta Creeks: Youth and the Politics of Space

Spaces do not just provide a context; they provide a medium and a means and a momentum, as well as a measure.

—Nigel Thrift, "Immaculate Warfare?" (274)

In their introduction to the book of essays, *Echoes from the Poisoned Well* (2006), Sylvia Hood Washington, Paul C. Rosier, and Heather Goodall observe that "how people have conceived of and striven for justice is shaped by the ways in which place and environment are understood, the ways in which places carry meaning for the people who live within and across them" (xxii). Framed within the larger context of the resistance against exploitation, poverty and the fight for environmental justice by indigenous peoples all over the world, this observation offers a very meaningful critical map for interrogating and apprehending the identity politics of the Niger Delta youth in their quest for both individual survival and collective self-determination. In mobilizing "space" as an analytical tool for untangling the identity politics of the Niger Delta militants, I seek to transcend the popular conception of space as limited to sheer physical geography. If, as Doreen Massey has argued, "notions of place and

territory are fundamental elements of state politics” (6), then it is perhaps imperative that we pay attention to the spatial articulations of power and/or agency in relation to state versus non-state actors in the Niger Delta rebellion. It appears all the more imperative to pay attention to these articulations when one considers that the Niger Delta insurrection was, and still is, essentially about space (the Niger Delta wetland), the natural wealth (crude oil) located within that space, and the struggles by both global and local politico-economic forces over control of that resource.¹⁰ At the very heart of the armed contestation in the region, then, was the hinge between space, on the one hand, and politics and culture, on the other. In other words, how state and corporate elements lay claim to a certain territory (the Niger Delta), and how indigenous occupants of that area (the young militants) resisted that claim through the “spatial” articulation of control (via insurgency), is at the core of the investigation here. In this manner we are not only looking at how “space” is “socially constructed,” but also how “the social is spatially constructed too” (Massey 6). Teasing out these linkages between space, politics and youth struggles in the Niger Delta also means acknowledging the global oil empire itself, as Michael Watts has convincingly argued, as a space of “geostrategic operation, saturated by considerations of power, calculation, security and threat” (“Crude Politics” 11). This trajectory of my critique inevitably requires attention to the topography of the Niger Delta and how that unique geography played into the political, economic and social contestations unfolding there.

In geographical terms, what is today referred to as the Niger Delta is one of the world’s largest wetlands. Occupying a large expanse of area about 70,000 square kilometres, it stretches across nine different states in the coastal South of Nigeria, which borders the Gulf of Guinea, the lobe-shaped “armpit” along the west coast of Africa extending across Cameroun, Equatorial Guinea, Sao Tome and Principe, Gabon, and Angola. Topographically, the Niger Delta is mostly characterised by swamps, mangroves, marine water, creeks, rivers, canals, estuaries, patches of thick forests, and so on. Thus the Delta terrain, as Ed Kashi observes, is “tricky with remote areas reachable only by small boats and along every road and waterway danger lurks for the intruder” (27). This peculiar spatial character of the region thus makes it not only difficult to traverse but also one of the most difficult places on earth to engage in military battle or even to mount effective state surveillance. Former Commander of the Joint Task Force (JTF), Major General Sarkin Yarki Bello, acknowledged this much to me in an interview I had with him in his office on 26 August 2010. He said that coastal insurgency was new to the world’s military and that it posed enormous challenges for the Nigerian military personnel on the ground. Like all wetlands, then, the Niger Delta is “easy to defend and hard to attack” (Giblett 205).

This treacherous character of the Delta became a strategic military advantage for the over fifty armed revolutionary groups that converged and operated from the rich swamps of the region between 2006 and 2009.

Most of the ex-militants I interviewed told me that it was from the creeks that they planned their attacks on military and police posts and personnel, equipment of transnational oil companies and their employees, and even state oil facilities, very often located in urban centres. It was to the same murky creeks that these youth retreated after their attacks. The ex-militants told me that once in a while they melted into major towns like Port Harcourt (Rivers State), Benin (Edo state), and Warri (Delta State) and hung out with girlfriends, wives and family in hotels and other obscure hideouts. The creeks, however, remained “their space”—a space the young militants “knew very well,” as one of the ex-militants told me. The creeks were therefore transformed into a strategic counter-geography in which youth not only coalesced to form new resistive identities but also, as one scholar argues in relation to cities, build “social capital [...] and new forms of collective action” (Golan, *Closing*).



Figure 1, Egbema 1, Ex-Commander of the Militant Group in Edo State taking the researcher to his former camp in the Delta creeks.

In May 2009, for example, following the massive crackdown of the JTF on Camp 5 (and the entire environs in Gbaramatu), armed youth launched massive retaliation attacks on oil facilities in the creeks that almost crippled Nigeria’s gigantic oil infrastructure. Camp 5 itself was the home base of the most dreaded ground commander of the youth rebellion, popularly known as General Okpebikporo Tompolo. Watts provides details of the daring attacks:

The militants in return launched ferocious reprisal attacks, gutting Chev[r]on’s Okan manifold which controls 80% of the company’s shipments of oil. Over a two month period from mid-May to mid-July, twelve attacks were launched against Nigeria’s \$120 billion oil infrastructure. Agip was forced to declare *force majeure* on its Brass fields while Shell, following several devastating attacks on well-heads and pipelines near Escravos (in the west) and the Cawthorne channel (in the east), was losing \$20 million per day in deferred production from its onshore operations. 124 of Nigeria’s 300 operating oil fields were shut by mid-July. Then late in the night of July 12th

2009, 15 MEND [Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta] gunboats launched an audacious and devastating assault on Atlas Cove, a major oil facility in Lagos, the economic heart of the country, three hundred miles from the Niger delta oilfields. (“Crude Politics” 2)

On Thursday 19 June 2008, armed youth belonging to MEND, the umbrella organization for the armed insurgents, sped on their boats for 220 kilometres of open sea water without being noticed by the JTF and attacked the SPDC’s 60 square-kilometre (USD 3.6 billion) Bonga deep water sub-sea oil production and storage infrastructure (with a production capacity of 200,000 bpd, 10% of Nigeria’s total production capacity). On Monday 12 November 2007, armed militants attacked Exxon Mobil’s Ibeno Jetty, in Eket Local Government Area of Akwa Ibom State where the militants “overpowered some Navy personnel on location and snatched machine guns” (“Militants”). Approximately 600 foreign oil expatriates working for multinational oil corporations were kidnapped and taken hostage for ransom between 2003, when Alhaji Mujahid Asari Dokubo declared his “Operation Locust Feast” in the Niger Delta, and October 2010, when John Togo exploded again in the creeks in protest against the Amnesty program.



Figure 2, Youth submitting weapons at the state security office in Bomadi, Delta State

With over 300 military attacks on oil installations scattered all over the swampy delta, these series of attacks by armed youth in the swampy creeks not only crippled the tenth oil-producing nation of the world, rattling the Nigerian ruling elite, but it also flummoxed transnational oil deities like Shell and Chevron, and made mince meat of the Nigerian military, ridiculing its touted professionalism and its claim of control over and mastery of the oil region. In less than five years, a new generation of Niger Delta youth had turned the region into what Watts calls “a space of ungovernability” (“Crude Politics” 14), achieving what their forebears

could not accomplish in fifty years through peaceful protests and legal games in courts. And by negating the governability of the seemingly subdued region, the youth had succeeded in installing their own “order” within a regional universe of crude capitalist accumulation and cruel postcolonial governmentality. By invading offshore oil platforms 200-300 kilometres from the shore, as well as heavily fortified company compounds, and by retrieving foreign workers, fiercely engaging the Nigerian military armed with armoured vehicles and sophisticated weaponry, ransacking police posts for munitions and dissolving into the creeks, the Niger Delta youth were articulating a new spatial arena of “contentious politics” in which the Niger Delta wetland functioned doubly as a space of contestation and a weapon of armed struggle. While the state had superior military might, the youth knew the crevices of the coastal waters and the surrounding creeks stretching from Lagos to Calabar. They could sail across the entire length and breadth of the Delta wetland without the help of a map or any other navigational aids. In the aesthetics of violence in the region, therefore, the Delta became both an impenetrable *sanctuary* and a strategic *instrument* of war. Like the Fens in Ireland, the Seminoles in America, and the Vietnamese in the Mekong Delta, the Niger Delta wetland functioned both “as refuge and site of resistance” (Giblett 210) for the young revolutionaries of the region.

But there is more to the spatial articulation of power in the Delta during the insurgency. The youth’s rupturing of industrial peace in the delta drew acutely from the criminal capital bequeathed to them by the ruling elite and corporate forces themselves. As a number of studies have shown, from Asari to the most inconsequential of gangs in the slums of Warri, Yenagoa or Port Harcourt, the “instrumentalization of disorder” (to borrow Patrick Chabal’s phrase) was learned from both state agents and corporate forces. Most of the youth had been unleashed by local politicians as political thugs for hounding opposition forces while the big oil and construction companies deployed the same youth for protecting their production and storage facilities or even for bullying competing companies jostling for juicy contracts with them.¹¹ And the creeks provided a perfect cover for the nocturnal meetings held with politicians, military bigwigs, corporate fat cats and manipulative tribal kings and elders who engineered scores of youth to murder and harass opposition political forces and environmental and human rights activists. Generally abandoned and ignored after political and economic victories, these youth turned to the same repertoires of violence they had learned from their state and corporate masters for both individual survival and collective social resistance. The subsequent weaponization of disorder by youth in the Delta thus represents a different kind of *movement* across space and time in which young people reinvent subjective violence and chaos and redirect it against those from whom they had learnt it. Here we see a palpable example of how systemic violence “creates the conditions for the explosion of subjective violence” (Žižek 31).

If the Niger Delta is a space of contradiction in the sense in which egregious poverty exists side by side with stupendous wealth—what Terry Karl calls the “paradox of plenty”—then space became a key weapon in not only rupturing that contradictory order but also in installing a different kind of order, what Peter Mass calls “ordered chaos.” In this context, the mastery of space becomes a significant part of political violence mobilized as a key *weapon of the weak* to give voice and recognition to the concerns of the common people, including the so-called futureless youth. And this was achieved primarily through the spatial construction of boundaries and borders, for the creeks became a space doubly safe and unsafe at the same time depending on where you belonged in the equation. This dynamic in many ways is a clear example of how, as Massey argues in relation to the politics of youth cultures, “strategies of spatial organisation are deeply bound up with the social production of identities” (127). The creeks became central to both individual and collective processes of territorialisation in which individuals and groups claimed certain spaces as a way of erecting boundaries of exclusion and inclusion, and in the process articulating forms of power, control and agency amidst the impoverishing antics of global corporate and local political forces.

Reinventing Criminal Capital: Youth, Illegal Oil Bunkering and Social Agency in the Delta

It is assumed that our motivation is derived from a desire to steal little amounts of crude oil from pipelines. What we are fighting for aside from what we term to be a liberation of the Niger Delta peoples from 50 years of political and economic slavery, is that the truth be heard everywhere about our fight for the freedom of the peoples of the Niger delta who have cried out in vain for help.
—MEND leader Jomo Gbomo, “Shadows and Light”¹²

One of the major fallouts from the crisis in the Niger Delta was the dramatic rise in illegal oil bunkering or oil theft. Bunkering itself, as the oil industry’s related activity, involves the transfer or siphoning of fuel from highly protected storage facilities into ship bunkers for onward transportation abroad. In Nigeria, oil bunkering describes the subterranean and unlawful extraction of crude oil products from Oil Company and NNPC pipelines and storage facilities into large containers for onward transportation via speed boats and badges into the high seas. These products are then sold to invisible but powerful international cartels run mostly by foreigners. At the local level, a vibrant and thriving “black market” had opened up in Ore, Ogun State, where most of the young militants found a veritable market in which to sell crude oil to local manufacturing and big construction companies who preferred the cheap and easy crude peddled by the Delta youth for running huge production machineries. Access to the crude was often made possible through a network of intelligence both within and outside the oil companies. This

network facilitated the hot-tapping of oil pipelines, the subversion of manifolds and, in some cases, the outright blowing up of wellheads or underwater pipelines with dynamite. According to a report commissioned by Shell in 2003, it was estimated that “a staggering 275,000 to 685,000 barrels per day of crude were being stolen by oil thieves in the Delta” (Shaxson 201). Between 2003 and 2008, the Nigerian government was losing an estimated “\$22.5 million daily (on \$90/barrel price)” (Clarke 98). Bunkering alone accounted for at least 15% of annual output losses for the oil majors in the region, losses that translated into “billions of dollars a year for the bunkerers” (Mass 73). Much of this underground wealth was funnelled back into the conflict in the form of liquid capital for the purchase of weapons by the militants.¹³

For an informal economy that generated between USD 1.5 billion and USD 4 billion annually (Peel 15), bunkering could not have been an exclusive sector run solely by the Niger Delta youth. From my interviews and informal discussions with the ex-militants, it was obvious that the roots of bunkering as a national counter-culture extended beyond its conventional history, which is often traced to Alhaji Asari Dokubo in 2003. Although Asari popularised and legitimized bunkering with his revolutionary and populist rhetoric, a long and entrenched culture of subversion was already thriving underground in the Niger Delta oil sector even before the open conflict between 2003 and 2010. Jobless and hapless, most of the young militants had worked as couriers for government officials, oil industry officials, and military and naval personnel ferrying thousands of barrels of crude from wellheads to badges stationed at strategic locations within the creeks. These barrels were later delivered to mobile oil syndicates run by foreigners in the Gulf of Guinea, close to the Atlantic Ocean. The contacts with this guerrilla market opened up new vistas of prosperity, quick wealth and survival for the struggling youth, a reality that ultimately became the game-changer for the conflict in the region. Many of these youth renegotiated with the offshore cartels for direct supplies under cheaper terms and in many cases accepted weapons, gunboats, cars, Blackberries and I-phones, and other small and portable postmodern technologies in lieu of cash for the crude oil they supplied. In less than six months, cities like Port Harcourt, Yenagoa, Warri, Benin, and Uyo became awash with not just guns and drugs but big cars like Lincoln navigators, BMW and Hummer jeeps, Range Rovers and other accoutrements of postmodern life.

My point here, however, is that beyond the fetid and dangerous medley of money, guns, and big cars that trailed illegal oil bunkering, the everyday life of the militants and their families had been redefined in fundamental ways. This aspect is often glossed over by scholars and journalists who have researched and written on the sordid conditions in the Delta. Many of the militants came from communities where scores of youth with high school certificates, college diplomas, and university degrees were jobless. Others without certificates but with an unquenchable desire for education could not afford it because their communities had no

schools or their families could not afford money to train them. This is in spite of the huge wealth belching forth from their communities. Now earning monthly salaries as gunmen, armourers, cooks, native doctors, intelligence officers and other such sundry roles with money that came from militancy and bunkering, the youth could now feed and support themselves, their wives/husbands, aging parents, siblings, girlfriends/boyfriends, extended family members, etc. If the global oil industry is the ultimate “enclave industry” obsessed with highly skilled or professionalised international labour (Ghazvinian 14), an orientation that effectively excludes thousands of local youth from gainful employment, then bunkering became a new site of economic activity and empowerment, a newfound socio-economic “counter enclave” in which youth could deploy what was left of their own local skills for daily survival.



Figure 3. Young men moving illegally bunkered crude in the Delta

Perhaps one way of making sense of illegal oil bunkering as a counterculture—in the sense in which it negates formal processes of accumulating legitimate profits from economic activity—is to ask the following question: what should frustrated and jobless youth do when dubious political elites and greedy international corporate elements refuse to pay attention to the concerns and cries originating from outside the spheres of power and privilege? Thinking about this question also means thinking about the nature of the petro-state in postcolonial Africa and how its intrinsic structural violence against its own people, in most cases by its lack of engagement with popular concerns, might generate new repertoires of violence from below the spheres of state. Ricardo Oliveira untangles the complex character of what he calls the “successful failed state” in the Gulf of Guinea, pointing to how unfettered access to colossal wealth in the form of oil rents, combined with the support from the international economy, has led not only to the abandonment of other viable fiscal options within the petro state (like domestic taxation and income from

agricultural exports) but also the near absence of any kind of “engagement” with the larger population (8). The outcome, as Oliveira eloquently argues, is chronic economic decline and unthinkable human destitution. The beneficiaries of this dastardly system, at least in the “medium-term,” are those “partaking in it” (21). But such indifference from the postcolonial state, although seemingly viable in the short run, inevitably generates new survival economies that seek to wrestle from the state what it denies its own citizens. Let me take recourse to one anecdote as a way of clarifying my arguments here.

In one of my trips to the Niger Delta in March 2011, one of my research assistants took me to his place in the bay side of Warri—old Warri town—to arrange for a boat for one of our trips to the creeks. On arrival we met a group of young boys, about twenty in number, who were engaged in small chatter about one of their own who had been caught stealing. But for the timely intervention of some senior folks, the boys were poised to dish out “jungle justice”¹⁴ to the thieving colleague right there at the river side. These angry youth were the same set of militants involved in oil theft, popularly known as oil bunkering, in Nigeria. Curious, I asked the boys what difference there was really between everyday stealing and oil bunkering. They told me that there was nothing criminal about bunkering. By their own assessment, oil theft was a counter strategy aimed at redeeming people from slavery and recouping what had been taken away from them for years without their consent by the Nigerian state and multinational oil companies. They told me about high-ranking army officials, naval officers, politicians, and oil industry big shots that had used them for oil bunkering and pointed to the stinking and dirty toilet directly behind us as the only gain they got from such dangerous enterprises and criminal liaisons with “Big Men.”

The bigger picture that the illegal oil bunkering culture offers us, then, is an amazing example of how deprived, exploited and disempowered youth could be engaged in new and subversive postcolonial existential politics marked by reversals, renovations, and reinventions of apparatuses and structures of criminal domination. These youth redeploy existing economic and military capital and knowledge(s) gained from local and global oppressive forces in recalibrating not only their own lives but also the lives of people around them. If the Delta is, as Michael Peel has observed, “a region where a system of militarized capitalism was used to further the interests of British [and now Anglo-American] colonization and commerce” (40), then youth were now tapping into the same repertoires of capitalist militarism in resisting violent coercion and exploitation and in instituting alternative economic networks for everyday survival. Most youth I spoke with saw bunkering not as oil theft but as a legitimate retrieval of material resources denied them by wicked politicians and greedy transnational capitalists like Shell, Chevron, and Agip. For the Niger Delta youth, therefore, oil bunkering was, as John Ghazvinian has rightfully noted, “a deadly serious game of chicken with the Nigerian state [and Oil Multinationals]—a desperate *cri de coeur* from

a lost generation that sees no other way to claim its hydrocarbon birthright” (6). If oil wealth is the underserved windfall sent as manna from heaven and for which big transnational oil companies and powerful Nigerian politicians have punished its people, then there was nothing absolutely wrong in sharing, “by any means necessary,” in this fruit of divine grace.

Conclusion: The Moral Economy of Youth Violence in the Niger Delta

The figure of the African youth is at the very core of the proliferating hot-spots in sub-Saharan Africa today.¹⁵ Like most young people all over the developing world, the African youth, disillusioned by the failure of their older compatriots to deliver the promises of democracy and globalization, and anxious about their futures in the midst of cruel scarcities and the unequal distribution of collective wealth, have now taken to violence as a way of providing themselves with “opportunities, at least in the short term, to assume control over their lives and to have some influence on social history” (Daiute 12). What we have witnessed in the entire continent in the last two decades or so, then, is the increased presence, often in the form of rebellion, of youth in both the domestic and public spheres.¹⁶ This sudden explosion of African youth in both private and public spaces in the form of insurgencies, revolutions, vigilantism, and other anti-state activities, I will argue, is not only constitutive of global “identity processes arising from local concerns and conditions” (13), but it also signals a troubled postcolonial history where young people have remained resilient, making meaning of their lives in “a climate of social instability and endemic conflict” (De Boeck and Honwana 2).

In this paper I have interrogated a specific example of this dynamic of violent youth identity politics in Africa, spotlighting particularly the oil rich Niger Delta region. Focusing chiefly on the violent activities of militant youth in the Niger Delta area in Nigeria between 2006 and 2009, I have examined how a new generation of disenchanted youth drew on certain repertoires of violence in redefining the prolonged fraught relations between the youth, the Nigerian state, and multi-national Oil Corporations. Drawing on my interaction and conversations with about sixty ex-militants across the Niger Delta within a three-month period, and combined with multidisciplinary insights from anthropology, geography, and other socio-cultural theories, I have reflected on the specific reinvention and deployment of violent force by militant youth in the area not only in staging discontent and legitimacy but also as a strategy of bargaining for “material benefits” from the Nigerian state and transnational oil corporations.

In examining youth conflict as waged by the Niger Delta youth against “Big Governments” and “Big Oil Companies,” I do not, as

indicated from the outset, mean to legitimize subjective youth violence as enacted by the militants. Rather, I aim to point to how these youth, as part of everyday life politics, especially in the context of the misdistribution of state resources, understood and deployed subjective violence, according to Friedrich Engels, as “the accelerator of economic development” (Arendt 9). If violence is a relational enterprise between the perpetrators (doers) and receptors (victims), then I have demonstrated how the youth in the Niger Delta have felt, interpreted, understood, and responded to the systemic violence by the Nigerian state and multinational oil corporations which they have endured for well over five decades. As Colette Daiute has argued, youth conflict as a recurrent social practice is “an activity characterized by circumstances, goals, expectations, behaviours, and discourses in particular contexts” (9). Indeed, as Nancy Peluso and Watts argue, violence is a “site-specific phenomenon rooted in local histories and social relations yet connected to larger processes of material transformation and power relations” (“Petro-Violence” 5). This is evidenced in the response by one of the ex-militants from General Tompolo’s Camp 5 when I asked him why he joined the armed youth groups in the Delta:

I gained admission into the Ambrose Ali University, and the year I gained admission, I was financially bankrupt and I didn’t have anything to do so when I saw my brothers carrying on this race and I didn’t have money to forward myself, I decided to join them to bring the people out of slavery. (Ex-Militant)

This response, I believe, triangulates the often ignored linkages between grievous state neglect of local communities, the tacit complicity of global economic interests in sustaining such vicious systems of postcolonial governance, and the rise of militant youth violence in the Delta region.

Notes

1. See, for example, Ghazvinian; Omeje, *High Stakes*, and Omeje ed., *Extractive Economies*; Peel; and Rowel, Marriott, and Stockman.

2. See Ajaero, 15.

3. In April 2012, for instance, London-based PLATFORM launched the website *Remember Saro-Wiwa*, with the current target “to hold Shell to account in acting on the UN Environment Programme’s report ‘Environment Assessment of Ogoniland’ (2011).”

3. See Ifeka; Osaghae, Ikelegbe, Olarinmoye, and Okhomina; Tuodolo; Ukeje; and Omeje, “The State.”

4. See Omeje, “Unending.”

5. See O'Brien.

6. See Dolby and Rizvi; Maira and Soeps; and Miles.

7. See Oriola.

8. See Kashi, 27.

9. This is evident in the long history of oil-related legislation in the Niger Delta, where either colonial or indigenous postcolonial authorities have framed the region as a "national space." The implication is that any resources found therein are owned by the state and not the indigenes. For a recent in-depth analysis of oil legislation in the Delta, see Omeje, *High Stakes*, 35-46.

10. See Human Rights Watch Report, "Criminal Politics."

11. See also Kashi, 27.

12. See Duquet.

13. A term used in Nigeria to designate the administration of "instant justice" by non-state actors to perceived criminals.

14. See Bay and Donham.

15. See Douif.

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