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Kenneth Omeje

The prime concern by the Nigerian state in the management of the oil conflicts in the Niger Delta has been to maximise oil revenues. What is probably most confounding about this strategy is the evolving tendency to twist and treat every conflict in the Niger Delta, including some episodic ‘epi-oil’ conflicts abetted or orchestrated by the state itself, as oil conflicts. In other words, there is a tendency on the part of the state to wittingly ‘oilify’ some apparently extra-oil conflicts. Compared to other regimes before it, the present civilian administration has probably contributed most to the fast-tracking of this evolving phenomenon. This article unravels and analyses the evolving politics of oilification of extra-oil conflicts in the Niger Delta, its underlying rationale and consequences. Oilification, as the study demonstrates, is yet another in the series of dangerous contradictions engendered by the Nigerian state. How this and other dangerous contradictions could possibly be solved is a research conundrum for the relevant cognoscenti of state-society relations and conflicts in Nigeria. But would the Nigerian state take on board any useful and promising solutions materialising from such studies? This is most unlikely in the present conjuncture given the prevailing configuration of interests in the state.

In contemporary history, most states thrive on a range of dialectical contradictions, which rather than threaten their stability, viability and existence are variously resolved to rekindle social progress. But the Nigerian state, like a few others in the Third World, thrive on dangerous contradictions that are ‘life threatening’ and obstructive of social progress and place the life of the state at stake. Since it was proclaimed a federation by the colonial authorities in 1954, all subsequent post-independent constitutions have in their preliminary and substantive provisions reiterated the principle of federalism as a core principle of state structure. Successive regimes, both military and civilian, have all reaffirmed this commitment including its defining parameters of equitable sharing of power and resources between the centre and the relatively autonomous, federating, subnational governments. But in reality, the post-colonial centre has progressively sequestrated, disempowered and de-authorised the subnational space, creating a centripetal structure based on a top-bottom diktat and tokenism. From a fifty-fifty equity share in 1960, for instance, allocation of revenues based on resource derivation from the centre to state governments has more or less whittled down against exponential increases in oil revenues – the major source of national income (Human Rights Watch, 1999:42). From a crippling low of 1.5 per cent in the 1990s, it rose to 3 per cent and subsequently to the present 13 per cent – thanks to the spread of violent agitation for resource control at the periphery in the oil-rich Niger Delta region (see Fubara,
The centre retains a lion’s share of the monthly shared revenues between the federal government and the subordinate governments. Furthermore, Nigerian laws exclusively vest the ownership of all mineral resources, including oil, in the centre; likewise defence (the armed forces), land ownership (but most ambiguously not land allocation and usufruct) and law enforcement mechanisms are all centralised. To this end, federalism in Nigeria tends to be contradicted by the institutionalised politics of unitary control.

Similarly, secularity is a principle of state organisation that has been professed by the various post-independence constitutions, governments and Nigerian leaders. Of course, to derogate in theory from this commitment, as the state’s power brokers and political leaders would have known too well, would be a recipe for disaster given the overlap of religious and ethnic identities. But the ideal has never been the real and the notion of secularity has scarcely translated into political secularisation; on the contrary, de-secularity has been Nigeria’s recurring Pandora’s Box. Based on the experiences of Sharia politics, it is indicative that many Nigerian leaders and politicians have fiddled with secularity to gain misguided political advantages with all too obvious catastrophic consequences. Indeed, both a mosque and a church are situated and operate inside the presidential villa, Aso Rock in Abuja. In the executive power domains of many States and local government councils of the federation where a dominant religion is mostly favoured, it is either a mosque or a church that has been established. Avoidable tensions are raised at the locus centrum of power, especially given the wider context of the perennial Muslim-Christian unrest in various parts of the country and the occasional inflammatory religious pronouncements of some of the political leaders. These processes are certainly not consistent with the principle of secularity.

At another level, the embattled history of democracy in Nigeria is well known. The present Fourth Civilian Republic inaugurated in May 1999 came at an extraordinarily huge price after some fifteen years of a vicious military dictatorship. In a similar vein to the botched experiments of the past, Nigeria’s fledgling democracy is under severe threat, triggered by anti-democratic contradictions and pressures of misgovernance. Barefaced looting, corruption and unaccountable rule have continued unabated at all levels of government with the result that Nigeria’s image and ranking as one of the three most corrupt countries in the world have not improved since the inauguration of the present Republic. Most disastrously, some invidious forces of de-democratisation that inexorably shrink the democratic space continue to progressively contradict democracy in Nigeria. Political participation, like in the previous civilian Republics, has virtually been reduced to election-prone mobilisation of vulnerable youth populations for propaganda, violence, and fraud. But unlike the previous dispensations, there has been limited space to debate pressing policy or national issues (e.g. deregulation, Sharia law, rising incidents of communal and ethno-religious violence, oil conflict in the Niger Delta, political disorder and the upsurge of ethnic armies and civil militias in many States) in the present Republic. The latter is a tendency associated with the entrenched barrack culture, executive absolutism and authoritarian legacy of past military regimes, as well as the continued domination of the political landscape by ex-military leaders and civilian politicians groomed under their dictatorship. Decision making has, to a disquieting extent, been centralised and hijacked by the executive wing in a tradition that acrimoniously overrides the legislative wing and repudiates all norms of interest aggregation and representation of subalterns. As such, social alienation, compounded by the burgeoning brunt of misgovernance and the current phase of
the federal government/World Bank deregulation policies, has exacerbated friction between the state and civil society thereby deepening the conflict.

Nigeria is Africa’s largest oil-producing state and the world’s sixth largest exporter of crude oil. On average, over two million barrels are produced daily (VCL, 2003). But basic petroleum products, especially cooking gas and gasoline are perennially scarce in Nigerian streets and markets. The federal government – to the consternation of many – increasingly imports some of these refined products. As in the past, millions of dollars have been recently channelled into turn-around maintenance of some local oil refineries with no positive outcome (Vanguard, 2003a). But the untold truth is that importation of refined petrol on behalf of the state is a highly rewarding business for some of the influential members and cronies of the political regime, just one of the numerous contradictions of Nigeria’s highly dependent ‘monoeconomy’.

As all these contradictions of the state unfold, oil and the oil sector come under increasing pressure being the mainstay of the economy. Should ownership of oil resources continue to remain an exclusive prerogative of the federal government? Does the federal government have sufficient moral justification to continue to appropriate and expend – or as many would argue, misspend – a greater part of the oil revenues in light of the decades of neglect, impoverishment and degradation of the Niger Delta host communities on whose lands the bulk of Nigeria’s oil resources are produced? Under what general and specific conditions should the oil companies operate henceforth in the Niger Delta considering their appalling record of corporate social and environmental responsibilities over a greater part of their more than forty years history in the oil region? How can the relationship between the dominant stakeholders of Nigeria’s oil (i.e. the state, oil industry and oil-bearing communities) that have become riddled with disruptive conflicts be proactively improved? These questions are by no means exhaustive, neither are they central to this study. But these are questions and issues that tend to preoccupy the minds and dominate the discussions of a significant proportion of people in the Niger Delta – many of whom have strong views. Obviously there are some internal disagreements concerning the views and solutions professed by Delta peoples, but more fundamentally, their dominant proposals are almost inexorably in contradiction with the perspectives of both the state and the oil industry. Because of the high stakes, some fundamental interests are hardly conceded or compromised. Violent confrontation and conflict become inevitable.

Not unexpectedly, the state’s management of the oil conflict has been far from fair because of its interest to maximise oil revenues. What is probably most confounding about the state’s conflict management strategies is the evolving tendency to twist and treat every conflict in the Niger Delta, including some episodic ‘epi-oil’ conflicts abetted or orchestrated by the state itself, as oil conflicts. In other words, there is a tendency on the part of the state to wittingly ‘oilify’ some apparently extra-oil conflicts in the Delta. Compared to other regimes before it, the present civilian administration has probably contributed most to the fast-tracking of this evolving phenomenon. This article unravels and analyses the evolving politics of oilification of extra-oil conflicts in the Niger Delta, its underlying rationale and consequences. Oilification, as the study demonstrates, is yet another in the series of dangerous contradictions engendered by the Nigerian state. How this and other dangerous contradictions could possibly be solved is a research conundrum for the relevant cognoscenti of state-society relations and conflicts in Nigeria. But would the Nigerian state take on board any useful and promising solutions materialising from
such studies? This is most unlikely in the present conjuncture given the prevailing configuration of interests in the state.

Characterising the Nigerian State

The meaning and nature of the state are an unsettled discourse in politics, not least, the post-colonial state. However, the defining characteristics and dominant nature of the Nigerian state could be extrapolated with relative ease from the dynamics of its contemporary political history.

One of the dominant features of the post-colonial state is the structural coexistence of and friction between the ‘traditional’ and the ‘modern’ in the cultural, social, economic, legal and political frameworks of society. In contemporary African social anthropology, this phenomenon is termed ‘structural dualism’ (Nwanunobi, 1992). Structural dualism implies, for instance, that the inherited colonial contradictions between communitarian and capitalist economies, traditional and modern political systems, as well as customary and common laws are far from settled and that directed largely by indigenous actors, the post-colonial states are starkly confronted with new dialectics in the context of both ‘old’ (metropolitan forces) and ‘new’ (post-colonial elites) interests. This portrays the extremely unfinished nature of state making and compounds the institutional and instrumental constraints of the central authorities in unifying the disparate ethnic nationalities into a ‘modern’ nation-state.

Besides the colonial heritage – or as some scholars would argue, partly related to it – Nigeria is a ‘rentier’ state, largely dependent on oil mining rents, taxes and royalties paid by ‘transnational oil companies’ (TNOCs), and on profits from its equity stakes in the TNOCs’ investments. With oil as the mainstay of the economy, oil interests, including, of course, control of the accruable revenues, have become part of the defining characteristics of the dominant elite forces in the state. The state itself is, to a large extent, dominated by an unstable coalition of some ethnic majority elites whose geographical homelands have little or no oil reserves. Perceptibly, the dominance of the latter is largely to the disadvantage of the ethnic minorities of the Niger Delta area where the bulk of Nigeria’s oil resources are produced. Terisa Turner (1978:167) has used the concept of a ‘commercial triangle’ to depict these dominant elite forces which she conceptualises as a nexus between the TNOCs and their local Nigerian associates consisting of private middlemen, otherwise labelled ‘compradors’, and the state officials. Both the compradors and the state officials rely heavily on the state’s oil revenues to ultimately fund and reproduce their societal dominance through highly unproductive contrivances, including spurious and inflated contracts and imports, barefaced looting, that impede both economic growth and political stability (see Kemedi, 2003). In fact, Turner and Badru (1984:7) have quite convincingly argued that the occasional contradictions within the observed ‘hegemonic alliance of social class forces’ contribute to the spate of military coups and political instability in Nigeria. Many sensitive state’s policies (oil inclusive) are informed and midwifed by the economic and ‘primordial’ (clannish and ethno-exclusionist) interests of the dominant elite forces, which in respect of oil, partly coincides with the corporate interests of the TNOCs.

Yet, the nature of the relationships between the state and TNOCs in Nigeria remains a highly controversial question. Most dominant theories attribute a hegemonic alliance and/or a mere coincidence of interests between the two parties (cf. Ibeanu, 2000; Frynas, 2000; Okonta and Douglas, 2001).
Be that as it may, the state remains largely unpopular and domestically threatened, primarily because of the parochial interests it represents, its failure to deliver development to the populace and its tendency to alienate and to oppress the subjects. The element of oppression of subjects or to state more appropriately, the use of military violence against domestic threats is, in fact, a dominant characteristic of the state. Dating from its colonial origins, military violence has remained a principal method of the Nigerian state’s response to domestic security threats, a phenomenon that further complicates the contestation of its authority and legitimacy by disaffected individuals, social groups and subnational forces. Moreover, the state has rarely ever had any sense of proportion in the application and use of military violence. The strategic nature of oil to the economic survival of the state and to the prosperity of its dominant elite factions practically heightens the prospects of the state’s use of military violence against oil-related threats and conflict in the present historical conjuncture. Beleaguered and desperate, the state is scarcely impartial in its management of domestic threats and social conflicts. In fact, the Nigerian state lacks autonomy from the ruling elites and as Ukiwo (2003:129) aptly annotates:

*It is difficult to separate the [Nigerian] government from the state, much less the personalities. Thus the style of the leader robs off on the state. The authoritarian provenance of the present power brokers has led to the personification of the state. Soldiers sent on routine duties are described as an army of occupation and treated as such, because they are seen as agents of oppression or mercenaries of powerful men in government.*

The neopatrimonial tendency among incumbent power brokers to personify the state for all the wrong reasons, notably aggrandisement and display of wealth and power, exclusion and repression of critics and disloyal social forces is essentially part of what Mbembe (2001) has characterised as the ‘banality of power’ in African post-colonies. Lack of autonomy (real or perceived) disastrously impacts on the state’s credibility and its ability to manage security threats and to resolve social conflicts.

**Extra-Oil Frontiers of Conflict**

Contrary to popular perception, not all recent conflict in the Niger Delta have their origins directly in oil. Oil extraction and distribution, as well as oil revenue politics, no doubt, inform most contemporary conflicts in the Delta but these by no means occlude the existence of some extra-oil frontiers of conflict in the region. For clarity, I have deliberately chosen the phrase ‘extra-oil frontiers of conflict’ to conceptualise those trajectories of conflict that develop in the volatile Nigerian oil region without a compelling oil connection and which hypothetically could be resolved or, at the very least, contained, without arousing or inflaming oil passions. To achieve a proactive mediation, resolution or transformation of such conflicts, the role of the state as a fair arbiter, mediator, intervener or facilitator is potentially crucial. But in reality, the state has hardly fulfilled its ideal obligation in a greater part of both extra-oil and oil conflicts in the Niger Delta. For the unmistakably oil-based conflicts, which have been widely researched and lie beyond the purview of this article, the state mainly relies on military reprisal that may contribute to an exacerbation of the conflict; the same strategy is also extended for most extra-oil conflicts. Some examples include the criminal terrorising of defenceless citizens and communities by lawless gangs, factional violence in party politics and a few incidents of communal clashes over issues like alleged gerrymandering in local elections. There is a caveat to these examples: most communal strife and acts of local youth terror are strongly related to
oil. Having said that, a remarkable trend in the state’s application of military violence in extra-oil conflicts is that of ‘oilification’.

By ‘oilification’ I imply the process of distorting and reconstructing an extra-oil threat or conflict to give it an oil import in order to justify the state’s security action, including a ruthless military campaign. By corollary, it is the state or its accredited agents/agencies that most consequentially (but not exclusively) oilify. Most remarkably, oilification thrives on pranks and propaganda, spin and deceit. It is a political praxis that directly or indirectly hides under the ambiguous cliché of sovereign national interest to, at various times, reinvent and promote the crudest forms of elitist and ethnic or primordial interests. The sovereign national interest subsumed in the theory is nothing but oil. Nonetheless, from all indications, oilification not only negates the concept of sovereign national interest (whatever it means), but its intrinsic unilaterality and brutality even makes the phenomenon evasive to the minimum conditions that could have probably achieved an agreed national interest, notably a sovereign national conference or some other kind of national debate. In fact, the politics of oilification is in itself a threat to oil. Not surprisingly, some sections of the local media, especially those that are highly conservative and pro-establishment, have already pandered to the state’s new theory. One could infer from hindsight of Nigeria’s recent political history under prolonged military rule that sooner or later some disingenuous social activists could quite easily be persuaded and duly rewarded to champion and propagandise oilification theory. Though a phenomenon logically associated with extra-oil conflicts, there is a limited sense in which some state officials have applied oilification to oil conflicts and this in turn plays a key part in the rationalisation of the excesses of state power.

In the prosecution of oil conflicts, especially under past military regimes, the state and its agents have had to occasionally employ oilification theory to rationalise a number of atrocities, including extrajudicial arrest, prolonged detention, torture and killing of innocent citizens and adversaries. For instance, a large number of the extrajudicial atrocities perpetrated in the 1990s by the defunct Rivers State Special Task Force on Internal Security headed by Major Okuntimo against many law abiding persons and groups throughout the State, and who were ostensibly unconnected with the anti-oil campaign, were expediently rationalised via oilification (see NDT, 2001). Hence, within the context of oil conflicts, oilification helps protagonists and the state officials to justify the securitisation of non-oil threats and issues, including ill-motivated vendettas. But undoubtedly, the enormous urge to justifiably securitise provides an enhanced incentive to oilify in the case of the largely extra-oil threats and conflicts. Consequently, the current civilian regime tends to accord oilification a much more decisive twist.

It is pertinent to mention that oil and extra-oil conflicts in the Niger Delta area are, in the strictest sense, not mutually exclusive. The Niger Delta oil conflicts have a protracted and complex history and much of what has been conceptualised as extra-oil conflicts, as this study further reveals, are, by and large, episodic of more deep-rooted conflicts in some cases related to oil. Hence a distinction between the two categories of conflicts can perhaps largely be sustained analytically. But even such an analytical distinction is important a fortiori in view of the fact that extra-oil conflicts do not usually have compelling oil connections and could in all probability be (or retrospectively, have been) much better managed to significantly minimise waste and casualties and without arousing or inflaming oil passions. Faced with potentially varied options of response to extra-oil threats in the Niger Delta, the state
deliberately oilifies certain perceived threats to justify a mode and scale of (extreme) intervention that, in its own terms, would have ordinarily been invoked to counteract core oil threats. From the perspective of the state core or real oil threats, such as some incidents of pipeline sabotage, seizure of oil rigs and platforms and hostage taking by violent protesters, justifiably warrant decisive military action. Oilification is therefore unnecessary in this regard since the threats are sufficiently oil-centred.

In recent years, special military task forces, such as the Rivers State Special Task Force on Internal Security, ‘Operation Andoni’, ‘Operation HAKURI’ and ‘Operation Restore Hope’ have been created and used, especially in different parts of Rivers, Delta and Bayelsa States (the most restive oil-producing States) to torture and persecute large sections of people in the name of resolving oil conflicts, both real and imagined. In addition, the joint military task forces established for fighting civil crimes, such as ‘Operation Fire for Fire’ have hardly made any distinction between civil crimes in the Niger Delta and so-called oil sabotage offences, a distinction clearly spelt out under Nigerian laws. Given its obsession with oil, conflicts that have no apparent oil connections, such as the gerrymandering that has recently complicated the Warri crisis, the military invasion of Odi, factional intra- and inter-party violence in recent national elections in many parts of the Delta, are hypothetically reconstructed to draw an oil connection and thus create the necessary justification for a military reprisal. To be sure, oil is eminently strategic to Nigeria’s security. In addition, oil resources are considered highly important for the reinvention of the state, as well as for the reproduction of its dominant elite forces. Any threat to oil activity, from the state’s point of view, warrants a decisive action that both the Nigerian and international public would understandably condone. Therefore, oilifying an extra-oil threat or conflict in the Delta would and certainly does pay off as a convenient means of ‘securitisation.’ Some practical illustrations of this nascent politics are presented below.

The Odi Massacre

The Odi massacre provides one of the most instructive examples of the growing politics of oilification of extra-oil conflicts in the Niger Delta in order to justify the state’s violent interventions. An overview of the entire incident will suffice to drive home the point. In early November 1999, some militant Ijaw youths had abducted a team of seven policemen that came on an intelligence mission in the oil town of Odi in Bayelsa State. The policemen had gone to Odi to investigate rumours that some Ijaw youths were mobilising to storm the city of Lagos in reprisal for attacks carried out a month earlier on Ijaw residents in Lagos (an ethnic Yoruba metropolis) by the refractory ethnic Yoruba organisation, Odua People’s Congress (OPC) (see Ibeanu, 2002:165). Mobilisation of homeland ethnic volunteers to reinforce or back-up their migrant tribesmen in prosecuting an ethnic war, usually with the dominant host ethnic population, is a fairly old practice in Nigeria. The largely Christian Ibo, for instance, have rallied such homeland solidarity to counter some of their recent ethno-religious persecutions in some major largely Muslim commercial towns in Northern Nigeria.

The Ijaw militants in Odi said to be mobilising local volunteers to fight in the Ijaw-Yoruba (OPC) ethnic clashes in the Lagos suburb of Ajegunle, were originally part of the political thugs that aided the ruling People’s Democratic Party (PDP) to victory in the 1998/1999 general elections in Bayelsa State. Dumped by their patrons after...
the elections, these jobless youths reconstituted themselves into a criminal gang, terrorising the inhabitants of the state capital, Yenagoa. A combined team of soldiers and mobile policemen sacked them from their Yenagoa base in September 1999 and this compelled the group to relocate to Odi, the hometown of their leader, Ken Niweigha (ERA, 2002:7). They intensified their local terror activities in Odi until the outbreak of the Lagos ethnic hostilities, which the youths, being entirely ethnic Ijaw, attempted to capitalise on to reinvent themselves as champions of a supposedly popular pan-ethnic course. Relations between the Ijaw and the Yoruba have deteriorated in recent years, especially in the South-western State of Ondo where a minority Ijaw community had previously clashed with the dominant ethnic Yoruba. The Lagos conflict is believed in many quarters to be a carryover of the Ondo crisis.

Despite all appeals and entreaties from governments and civil groups, the lawless Odi youths executed the seven policemen, an act that aroused total public outrage. Part of the reasons why the youths perpetrated such a rare dastardly killing of their disarmed captives was that the policemen were said to have been led by a Yoruba officer, Thomas Jokotula, who a few months earlier had headed a combined team of servicemen that dislodged the lawless youths from their Yenagoa base (ERA, 2002:7).

President Obasanjo responded to the murder incident by ordering the Bayelsa State Governor, Diepreye Alamiyeseigha, in a letter dated 4 November 1999 to produce the culprits within fourteen days for prosecution. The President further threatened to invoke his executive power by imposing a state of emergency on Bayelsa if the murderers were not arrested and presented for prosecution. A few days to the expiration of the two weeks ultimatum, battle-geared federal troops under the orders of the presidency laid siege to Odi. The federal government’s explanation was that the lawless Odi gang, among other things, posed a major threat to oil. According to the then Nigerian Defence Minister, General Theophilous Danjuma who after the expiration of the President’s ultimatum, authorised the Odi invasion code-named ‘Operation HAKURI II’:

This ‘Operation HAKURI II’, was initiated with the mandate of protecting lives and property – particularly oil platforms, flowstations, operating rig terminals and pipelines, refineries and power installations in the Niger Delta.4

The rule of engagement of the over 2000 troops that invaded Odi was to shoot inhabitants at sight and at the end of the swift two days operation, some 2,483 civilians were reported killed (Vanguard, 2002; ERA, 2002). The government has repeatedly emphasised Danjuma’s theory, which leaves many to presume that this is nothing short of the official federal government explanation. Not unexpectedly, a number of government and pro-establishment media reports have reinforced government’s unsubstantiated claims that the Odi gang were a threat to oil. There is yet no confirmation that any members of the hunted gang, believed to have fled the community before the massacre, were among the dead. Moreover, no official charges of wrongdoing are known to have been brought against any of the soldiers that perpetrated the mass murder and devastation of the large Ijaw community.

Beyond the veneer of oilification, the Odi genocide is primarily episodic of the larger ethnic Ijaw-state confrontations. The Ijaw resistance against the oil industry and the state came to the fore during the second half of the 1990s in the aftermath of the tragic decapitation and crushing of the famous Ogoni resistance by the state. Since then, massive state violence has been severally employed against the Ijaw, the largest ethnic group in the Niger Delta. Both the Ogoni and Ijaw resistance have been
especially worrisome to the Nigerian state because in addition to undermining the revenue base of the state, the two ethnic groups have been the most vociferous minority groups championing the growing advocacy for regional autonomy, resource control at the subnational levels and self-determination – proposals that the state considers both upsetting and threatening. Ijaw youths seem to have the largest spread of militant groups that at various times particularly since 1997, have been involved in armed confrontation with the state’s security forces over ecological issues. These Ijaw militant groups include *inter alia* the Niger Delta Volunteer Force (NDVF), Pan Niger Delta Revolutionary Militia (PNDRM), Ijaw Youth Council (IYC), Federated Niger Delta Ijaw Communities (FNDIC), Movement for the Survival of Ijaw Ethnic Nationality (MOSIEN) and Niger Delta Oil Producing Communities (NDOPC) (cf. Ikelegbe, 2001:434-459; AP, 2003).

The profile of Ijaw resistance is extraordinarily enhanced by the belief of the general public, including members of the armed forces that most Ijaw militants complement their armed protests with a special talismanic power sourced from the people’s formidable Egbesu deity that makes them impervious to bullets (see Ibeanu, 2000:28). Occult belief systems, it must be emphasised, have substantial impact on current power relations, politics and development in Africa. In contemporary history, there have been different instances from countries like Cote d’Iviore, Kenya, Tanzania, Togo, Benin Republic and South Africa of occultic systems permeating the public realm over a broad range of issues, such as mesmerisation and persecution of people using witchcraft, divination and oath taking to affirm political loyalty or to establish official wrongdoing, talismanic empowerment for personal protection undertaken by some public office holders; regime security, as well as offensive defence and combating of threats (cf. Omeje, 2001; Kohnert, 2003; Kelsall, 2003). Nonetheless, the question of causality in respect of the use of occultic power and its presumed outcome can hardly be consistently explained to the satisfaction of a researcher’s ‘scientific mind’, and thus remains, in that sense, mystical and mysterious (Kelsall, 2003:197).

It is noteworthy that in a few isolated incidents, especially in non-combatant situations, the Ijaw militias have gained temporal advantages over the state’s security forces. The two most striking examples include the storming at the Yenagoa government house in July 1998 by thousands of Ijaw youths who overpowered the state’s security forces to release the detained MOSIEN’s president, Timi Ogoriba and the successful abduction/killing of the seven policemen that sparked off the Odi massacre. But in most cases, such temporal advantages, which invariably add credence to the presumed magical power and invincibility of the Ijaw militias, have ultimately resulted in more severe state crackdown and laying of military siege to Ijawland.

Oilification of the excesses of state power (not necessarily extra-oil conflicts) is not without parallels elsewhere in Africa, notably in Angola and Sudan. In Angola, for instance, government forces have in the past two years of a post-Savimbi (the deceased UNITA rebel leader) ceasefire marking the end of the Angolan civil war, perpetrated overwhelming human rights violations against scores of local people in the oil-rich Cabinda province where the Front for the Liberation of the Enclave of Cabinda (FLEC), among other separatist forces, have waged a war of self-determination against the state for over the past two decades (IRIN, 2003). The Angolan government has repeatedly justified its security forces’ recent infringement of defenceless local populations, including summary executions, murder, disappearances, arbitrary detention, torture, rape and looting on the grounds of
preserving the territorial integrity of Angola, as well as combating organised impediments to oil operations in the province (see IRIN, 2003).

**Beyond Odi: Ramifying Trends & Consequences**

The state’s oilification of extra-oil conflicts in the Niger Delta has, among other negative consequences, complicated the oil conflict by ultimately intensifying the buffeted locals’ hostilities towards oil operations. For instance, the Nigerian army and navy have in recent years launched repeated pre-emptive attacks on the Ijaw of Ogbe-Ijoh in Delta State who have battled their Itsekiri neighbours since 1997 over the relocation of a local government area (LGA) headquarters from the Ijaw community of Ogbe-Ijoh to the Itsekiri community of Ogidigben (Eke, 2003). Factional political violence between the ruling People’s Democratic Party (PDP) and the opposing parties in the run up to the recently concluded 2003/2004 elections characterised by widespread mobilisation of the youth for political thuggery provided an added opportunity for the PDP government to intensify its offensive against the Ijaw youths using joint military task forces created for combating anti-oil threats. The recent wave and escalation of Ijaw-Itsekiri violence linked to the unwarranted 1997 LGA headquarters’ transfer is basically an episodic conflict in the larger Warri crisis involving the Ijaw, Itsekiri and Uhrobo. But for the recent and unpopular relocation of the Warri South-West local government headquarters by the state, the present episodic dimension in the Warri ethnic crisis could most probably have been averted. Ijaw youths have in turn responded to the state’s military reprisals by intensifying attacks and resistance against Chevron and Shell oil operations along the Escravos River and Jones creek. In fact, the proliferation of clandestine militant groups and activities in the Ijaw-dominated parts of Niger Delta in recent years culminating in the exacerbation of Ijaw resistance against oil activities and the state are partly linked to the people’s collective malcontent over the Odi massacre and the Warri South-West municipality crisis (see Ikelegbe, 2001; Eke, 2003).

The direct impact of all these on the security of the local people and their environment on the one hand, as well as on the fortunes of the joint venture oil operations (state-TNOCs partnership) on the other hand, cannot be overemphasised. Thousands of people have been reportedly killed in the cycle of ethnic wars between the Itsekiri and Ijaw in the disputed Warri territory since 1997. And as these communal wars are prosecuted, the state has continued to systematically scapegoat, demonise and liquidate the Ijaw in the course of its lopsided intervention. At the same time, a considerable number of the TNOCs’ oil installations, in particular, Chevron’s facilities in the embattled host communities have been devastated. Oil spillage and environmental pollution have also increased remarkably, possibly due to ramifications of subversive protests, including pipeline sabotage. Meanwhile, in June 2003, Chevron’s Health, Environment and Safety Manager, Ray Keel, announced that the company was losing 130,000 barrels of crude oil per day (amounting to about $3.4 million daily loss to the joint venture) due to the continued ethnic disturbances and youth violence in Delta State (mostly the Warri area), which had necessitated the closure of all of its swamp flowstations (*This Day*, 2003). Hitherto, over 80 per cent of companies and business concerns, most of them petroleum affiliated, have deserted Warri on account of the unending communal crisis (*Vanguard*, 2003b). While many of the oil servicing companies have relocated to Port Harcourt in the South-east of the Niger Delta, most staff of the few remaining oil companies in Warri now reside in Benin, the capital city of the neighbouring Edo State.
Meanwhile, in an unequivocal oilification theory, President Obasanjo and Delta State Governor, James Ibori, have recently accused ‘illegal oil bunkerers’ as being the masterminds of the frequent bloodletting and crisis in Warri. According to the Nigerian President, illegal oil bunkerers foment and fuel the bloody ethnic clashes, including supplying warring factions with arms because the ensuing conflicts and confusion provide an opportunity for them to steal the nation’s crude oil (Daily Champion, 2003). Governor Ibori expanded Obasanjo’s theory: according to the Delta State Governor, ‘the oil bunkering syndicate behind the Warri crisis collaborate with foreigners to fuel the crisis with a view to creating room to enable them engage in their illegal oil deals in the creeks’ (Vanguard, 2003c). As expected, both the state’s print and electronic media have carried hugely supportive propaganda to back these official viewpoints. To say the least, the new state’s oilification theory aimed at reconstructing and treating the Warri crisis as a criminal externality of oil is most disingenuous. A number of Niger Delta leaders, including frontline Ijaw spokesman, Edwin Clark, and Itsekiri leader, Bob Mene-Afejeiku, have been quick to caution against this official explanation, but not without largely embracing President Obasanjo’s solution to the Warri crisis – a superficial proposal that most conspicuously occludes any chances of de-oilification (Vanguard, 2003d).

The Institutional Context
The institutional context for both oil and oilified conflicts in Nigeria is very much the same and thus, there is a sense in which the two cannot be rigidly separated. The state’s oil-related legislation and policies, as well as the different development programmes designed for the oil-bearing region, broadly define the institutional context for most conflicts in the Niger Delta. Scholars like Karl (1997), Watts (1999) and Frynas (2000) have aptly demonstrated the centrality of oil as a natural resource and oil rents shaping both a national political discourse and the broad rhythms of accumulation and social conflict. A typical example is the federal government’s establishment of the Oil Mineral Producing Areas Development Commission
(OMPADEC) in November 1992 with an allocation of 3 per cent of total oil revenue to be specifically used in developing oil-producing communities. To distribute development projects, OMPADEC loosely relied on the current inventory of communities’ contributions to net oil output (measured by the number of active oil wells). The conflicts that ensued were part of the scramble for control of the land containing oil wells among different Niger Delta communities – the basis for the distribution of OMPADEC’s development project. Many local communities that hitherto lived in peace were suddenly caught up in the throes of this ‘petro-violence’. The Ogoni, for instance, prosecuted inter-ethnic wars with nearly all of their neighbours: the Andoni in July 1993, the Okirika in December 1993, and the Ndoki and Asa in April 1994 (Ibeanu, 2000:27). A similar trend of violence characterises the implementation of the current development provisioning programmes and the youth vigilante security contract practices of the various TNOCs. In the case of the security contracts, local youths are hired and paid by the different TNOCs to protect the latter’s oil facilities and services within their respective communities. Because of the relatively substantial remuneration involved, this practice has generated enormous violence between the various security contract teams on the one hand, and disaffected rival youth groups and factions of the traditional political elites on the other. In respect of the ramification of conflicts connected to oil in the Delta, some scholars focusing on comparable conflicts in some volatile oil-producing countries (e.g. Colombia and Angola) and beyond, have argued that opportunity rather than motivation, greed rather than grievance, can account for the proliferation of predatory and militant groups, and that oil as a largely non-lootable but obstructable commodity is likely to increase the duration and intensity of conflicts (Collier & Hoefller, 2000; Pearce, 2002).

Besides the lure of development provisioning and oil security vigilantism, competition for land, forests, creeks and swamps containing oil resources has often provoked thorny conflicts between different Niger Delta communities and groups because of the potential rents and ‘gifts’ or dashes (including hard cash, food items, wine; and TNOCs’ diaries, calendars, key holders and related identification symbols) that control of such territorial spaces could attract from oil prospecting companies. Hence, petro-business is not only crucial to petro-accumulation and politics at the state level, it is also crucial for understanding the local accumulation processes and the changing dynamics of communal violence among the oil-bearing communities. In recent years, such oil-induced communal violence has taken a great toll on communities like Bille, Kalabari, Umuechem, Obagi, Brass, Nembe, Rumuobiokani, Ogu and Bolo culminating in the killing and displacement of thousands of local people. In fact, the rising tide of community fragmentation and reconfiguration, identity mutation and reconstruction, and the politics of boundary adjustment in the Niger Delta are all partly related to the dynamics of petro-politics and petro-accumulation that run through the entire Nigerian state. To this end, the politics of oilification in the Niger Delta is not exclusive to the state’s involvement in social conflicts. Various oil-bearing communities and groups have also increasingly oilified communal relations, resource struggles and violence in the Delta in their desperation to maximise oil rents and dividends. For instance, it is this institutional context that partly accounts for the persistence of the larger Warri crisis and its changing dynamics. However, unlike the state that invokes oilification theory in both oil (in a more restricted context) and extra-oil conflicts, the permeation of oilification to societal conflicts through the devices of many Niger Delta groups and communities tends to be conceivably limited to objects and issues of the oil conflict, such as struggles over oil-bearing lands, creeks and forests. More significantly, the
societal processes of oilification are part of the desperate responses of the local people to the institutionality and dynamics of petro-politics and petro-accumulation. Sometimes the response of the impoverished grassroots population are instigated or abetted by self-serving local elites (politicians, traditional leaders and businessmen) who in turn exploit communal violence and its attendant disruptions to petro-business as a bargaining weapon for extracting contracts, patronage, jobs, strategic appointments and other elements of petro-accumulation from the state and the oil industry. But in the final analysis, it is apparent that the oilification of extra-oil conflicts with all its tendencies to deceive and to mislead remains largely an orchestration of the state and its political elites.

Conclusion
Clearly, what is happening in Nigeria’s Niger Delta is that the state, which ideally should mediate the oil conflict, is itself a major prosecutor of the conflict, vigorously championing unconcealed and unpopular interests. The State’s primary interests are the economic and material well-being of the dominant local elites – mostly of the majority ethnic groups. Juxtaposed to the latter are the interests of the TNOCs given the centrality of oil to national revenues.

The unpopular nature of the state’s interests coupled with its inability to significantly accommodate the legitimate aspirations of the ethnic minorities of the oil-bearing Niger Delta predisposes the state to preponderantly rely on fusillades of military violence to suppress local anti-oil protests. Consequently, the state extends its application of military force to managing the largely extra-oil conflicts in the Delta, but as this article demonstrates, the state increasingly oilifies these conflicts in a bid to justify their securitisation using military action. Oilification also tends to complicate the oil conflict by intensifying the buffeted locals’ hostilities against oil operations in their areas.

As a means of placating the local oil-bearing communities and dissuading them from further resort to violent protests, the state has, during the past few years, progressively securitised Niger Delta development. The Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) established by the present Obasanjo administration is the latest example of the securitisation of development in the Nigerian oil-producing region. But there are, at least, two contradictions that attend to the state’s current development process. Foremost, the securitisation of Niger Delta development is essentially a concern of the federal government, which also appropriates and controls a greater share of the oil revenues. The federal government’s efforts are, however, contradicted by the tendency among subnational governments in the Delta (States and local governments) to largely abdicate responsibilities on development of oil communities to the TNOCs and the relatively less accessible and de-participatory new federal government agency (NDDC). This contradiction is an expression of the structural imbalance in the legal and fiscal frameworks of oil minerals, which, for instance, need to be renegotiated for state’s development efforts to have the necessary impact and local support.

More significantly, the state’s development programme is contradicted by the undiminished use of military reprisals on local anti-oil protesters, whose legitimate demands for environmental rehabilitation, resource control at local levels and participatory development, have been scarcely addressed. As a matter of fact, the state’s repression and insensitivity to the needs and demands of the local Niger
Delta people have made the expectations that the oil communities would progressively de-emphasise their violent protests substantially elusive.

In the final analysis, disruptive conflicts in and beyond the Nigerian oil-producing region will scarcely abate without some fundamental reforms in the structures and policies of the state to downgrade the predatory and corrupt interests of the dominant elites, and in their stead have the popular aspirations of the vast majority of the citizenry, including ethnic minorities, significantly incorporated into the trajectory of governance. Regrettably, there are no strong prospects of this happening in the foreseeable future. Nigeria in its over forty year post-colonial history has hardly proved to be a workable state. In fact, it has become much more unworkable today compared to the immediate post-independence era through the period preceding the emergence of the so-called oil boom of the 1970s, not withstanding the devastating Biafran civil war (1967-1970). The nexus and intensity of dangerous contradictions that inundate the polity today could probably have precipitated a military coup some fifteen to twenty years back. But the reputation of the Nigerian military is presently in tatters and under the prevailing international dispensation, a military coup d’état in Nigeria will certainly provoke far-reaching opprobrium. In the short term, the present cycle of political violence, including both oil and oilified conflicts, is likely to flourish with limited successful remedies. In the long term, disillusionment with presidential democracy, which apparently is the least suited variant of liberal democracy for Nigeria, will predictably make everything possible; from military mutinies to Robert Kaplan’s (1994) ‘criminal anarchy’ on the one hand, and from non-violent permutational devolution to violent factional disintegration on the other hand. My earnest wish is certainly that the worst case scenarios be averted.

Kenneth Omeje, Africa Centre, Department of Peace Studies, University of Bradford, West Yorkshire, UK; email: k.c.omeje1@bradford.ac.uk

Endnotes

1. These are revenues (predominantly oil receipts) that accrue to the distributable pool, namely the Federation Account and the Consolidated Revenue Fund of the federal government as contained in Section 162 (10) and Section 80 (4) of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999.

2. Among other theorists, Mohammed Ayoob (1995; 1997) aptly coalesces the debate on the nature and dynamics of the state and underscores the distinctiveness of the state in the Third World or the post-colonial state. Ayoob essentially conceives of the state as both an institutional and a territorial complex.

3. Securitisation is basically the process by which an issue is factored into the state’s security agenda, defined or recognised as a security problem and by so doing the state and its elites (power holders) acquire the legitimate authority and justification to take extraordinary measures (including allocation of social resources) to control or combat the identified issue or threat. Oilification, from this basic conception, is a more localised or contextualised dimension of the politics of securitisation. For a more elaborate formulation of the theory of securitisation, see Waever (1995); see also Knudsen (2001) for a constructive critique of the theory.

4. The Defence Minister made these remarks on 25 November 1999, some five days after the invasion and destruction of Odi. The Minister was rationalising the military action and the entire Niger Delta HAKURI campaign in an address delivered to the Ministerial Conference of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) (Vanguard, 2002; first published in the Nigerian national daily, The Guardian, 26 November 1999).
5. Verbal confessions of some of the soldiers that took part in the Odi operation, as well as a significant number of the graffiti they left on the walls of the destroyed buildings in the town reveal that the soldiers were specially inspired into genocidal action by their curious resolve to test and possibly demystify the highly publicised invincibility of the Egbesu cult. When ultimately the devastation of Odi proved a cakewalk, the soldiers stridently celebrated their victory by taunting the Egbesu both verbally and through their numerous graffiti (see ERA, 2002).

6. Ethnographic evidence has linked the Itsekiri to the Yoruba (one of the three dominant ethnic groups in Nigeria), a linkage the former have historically exploited to their political advantage in relation to other minority ethnic groups in the Niger Delta. The relocation of Warri South-West local government headquarters from an Ijaw to an Itsekiri town is only one of such political influences. The headquarters’ relocation was followed by an arbitrary reclassification of electoral wards that slashed the number of wards in the Ijaw area from ten to four and hiked the number of Itsekiri controlled wards from four to six. This gerrymandering, which has spawned explosive conflicts has persisted despite the fact that the Ijaw far outnumber the Itsekiri in the volatile local government area by 63 to 37 per cent. Beyond the recent episodic conflict in Warri South-West local government area, the general Warri crisis is a struggle over land, power and resources remotely linked to the town’s oil infrastructure (see Eke, 2003).

7. The President’s proposal merely stresses the need to combat oil bunkering and gunrunning in the area. But de-oilification or ridding the conflict of its spurious oil concomitants, in my views, should be part of any search for a genuine and lasting solution.

Bibliographic Note


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