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## From Aba to Ugborodo: Gender Identity and Alternative Discourse of Social Protest Among Women in the Oil Delta of Nigeria<sup>1</sup>

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A man must run for his dear life any morning he wakes up and sees a fowl pursuing him, because he does not know if the fowl grew teeth overnight! – African proverb.

The oil-rich Niger Delta became a hotbed of bitter rivalries and violent armed conflicts more intensely from the outset of the 1990s. Many of these conflicts degenerated into mass-based political mobilisations, hostage taking, and the disruption of oil production activities. Usually at the instigation of multinational oil companies, successive regimes have retaliated with military subjugation, harassment, intimidation, incarceration, imprisonment, and sometimes, the extrajudicial murder of notable militant elements as was the case with the hanging of Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight other Ogoni minority rights activists in November 1995. The cycles of community protests and state repression have, in turn, triggered a vicious regime of violence and insecurity in many oil communities in the Niger Delta of Nigeria. Community grievances have mostly revolved around issues of widespread unemployment, ecological degradation, lack or absence of social amenities and infrastructures, and irresponsible and unsustainable oil field practices by virtually all oil companies despite their claims to the contrary.

A recent study<sup>2</sup> based on empirical data gathered from six communities reveals that the major grievances of oil communities relate to ecological degradation, especially as it affects two subsistence economic activities, farming and

fishing; and the lack of employment opportunities for indigenes as oil companies are accused of showing preference for non-indigenes of Niger Delta in their recruitment policies. Others grievances include the lack of basic social infrastructure and economic development opportunities at the grassroots; non-compensation for land use and degradation, corporate insensitivity on the part of multinational oil companies, divide and rule tactics employed by oil companies in oil-producing communities, sexual harassment of local women by oil workers, as well as epidemics related to oil exploration. Thus, rather than mere expressions of blind violence, it is obvious that the wave of violent protests by oil communities are symptomatic of the 'decision of hitherto voiceless, subordinate and underprivileged minority groups to take up the gauntlet and challenge state structures and institutions controlled by majority groups who have been grossly unjust over time in the distribution of national resources' (Ojo 2002: 8).

Even more remarkable in the annals of protests and repressions in the Niger Delta were the events of the months of July and August 2002, when a wave of solo protests by women led, in quick succession, to the occupation of major oil platforms operated by a major US multinational oil company, ChevronTexaco, and a mass protest in front of the main entrance to the administrative headquarters of the Shell Petroleum Development Company (SPDC) for the western division located in Warri, Delta State. The first one by Itsekiri women of Ugborodo began on July 8 when a handful of women peacefully occupied the sprawling Escravos Tank Farm operated by ChevronTexaco for about two weeks.<sup>3</sup> Soon afterwards, Ijaw women from Gbaramatu and Egbema Kingdoms organised similar actions resulting in the forcible occupation of four flow stations located at Abiteye, Maraba/ Otunana, Dibi and Olero Creeks. The latter lasted eleven days, and was concluded after the executives of the company negotiated with, and signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the protesting women. The third protest which occurred in August differed slightly from the earlier two. Although it did not involve the physical occupation of oil installations, it started too peacefully when women gathered at the entrance to the SPDC complex and started singing, and dancing to protest songs, and preventing personnel and vehicular movements by barricading the main gates. The protest later led to violence when regular policemen and their notorious anti-riot wing popularly called 'kill-and-go' were invited to disperse the women using teargas and batons, leaving several injured and hospitalised.

Unlike the first two that involved rural women from similar ethnic backgrounds, the third protest drew heavily from the ranks of urban women drawn from the three major ethnic groups prominent in Delta State- namely the Ijaws, Itsekiris, Urhobos. Lastly, unlike the first two, the third event did not result in any peaceful negotiations with, or concession to the women; rather, as noted earlier, the protesters were dislodged.

My contention is that much can be learnt from the manner with which Itsekiri and Ijaw women successfully prosecuted their non-violent protests and occupations; just as the shortcomings that blighted a similar initiative by women drawn from the three ethnic groups who, in any case, are traditionally at loggerheads must also be properly reviewed for the important, although unsuccessful lessons they suggest. The section that follows contextualises the three protests against the background of the political economy of violent conflicts in the Niger Delta region – a political economy which, for a long time, has brought the Nigerian State and international oil capital into an alliance of incestuous relationships against the host oil communities. Thereafter, the paper focuses on various aspects and dimensions of the revolts by Itsekiri, Ijaw and Urhobo women either separately or together, against the background of the rich historical and contemporary antecedents of gender-specific social actions. Such would include but are not limited to the famous Aba and Egba Women's demonstrations against colonial legislation perceived as arbitrary and regressive, especially on taxation; the series of protests by women against the venality of military dictatorship in the 1990s; as well as those by women in the Oil Delta against oil companies and/or the Nigerian State with effect from the mid-1980s.

Briefly, by 'Aba to Ugborodo', the paper draws attention to the critical interface between the historical and recent logics of almost half a century of autonomous women's project in Nigeria. As shall become obvious shortly, the grievances of the women (and the manner with which they were articulated and implemented) during these specific historical moments between Aba and Ugborodo are not contextually or significantly different. The paper shows how the recent grassroots protests by women in the Niger Delta are in many ways a throwback to two dimensions of anti-colonial struggle. The first aspect was concerned with negating the crisis of capitalist accumulation, and the second, with challenging the contradictions that allow the crisis facing the Nigerian project to fester. The final section examines the alternative futures for women against the backdrop of possible and broader pan-Niger Delta rebellion by restive oil communities.

### **Oil and the Template of Violent Conflicts in the Niger Delta**

The discourse on the formation and transformation of gender identity within the oil communities of the Niger Delta must be presaged by an acknowledgement of the wider template on which community protests flourished. Without doubt, almost three-and-a-half decades of uninterrupted crude oil production in Nigeria has benefited only a tiny fraction of the predominantly male elites to the neglect (and often detriment) of the majority of inhabitants of oil-producing communities in the Niger Delta. This is not surprising, bearing in mind that the history (and politics) of hydrocarbon oil has also been aptly described as the history, and politics, of imperialism, *par excellence*. Nascent oil capital made its

earliest inroad into the emerging Nigerian formation in the 1930s when the imperatives of securing strategic oil minerals for the Imperial Navy led to frantic geological expeditions in the vast colonial outposts of Britain. By 1938, Shell D'arcy had confirmed the presence of oil in the southern Nigeria, although no one was sure at that time of the commercial value of this discovery. The outbreak of World War II, in 1939, slowed down the drive for crude oil, but only for the short period that the war lasted. By 1958, commercial deposits of crude oil were found in Oloibiri village in present day Rivers State, and in succession afterwards in other towns and villages throughout the riverine Niger Delta. Expectedly, the circumstances of its entry into Nigeria as well as its long, incestuous romance with the colonial government ensured that Shell continued to enjoy early-bird advantages in the oil industry. In turn, this unrestrained access to, and romance with successive post-colonial governments ensured that the company (and other multinational oil companies) could conveniently secure political insurance to engage in business without question and restraint in modern Nigeria.

The widespread expectations that commercial production of crude oil would accelerate national transformation were realised, but not without far-reaching economic, political and social consequences. In the first instance, the capital-intensive oil sector replaced the labour-intensive agricultural sector that traditionally had accounted for the bulk of domestic earning and foreign exchange, and in the process disenfranchised communities, oil-producing and non-oil producing alike. This process, in concrete terms, has severely affected – and in many cases, destroyed – subsistence economic opportunities on which many communities relied for close to a century of contact with European capitalism. In the specific case of the Niger Delta oil communities, the previous reliance on fishing, farming and other related income-generating activities is under severe threat from the side effects of oil exploration and production activities. Even non-oil producing regions experienced the dire consequences of increased attention to crude oil production as it intensified their immiseration and pushed many peasants towards violent revolts. Berry (1984: 5) has given a concrete example in the context of cocoa farming in Western Nigeria when the advent of oil pushed rural farmers away from intensive agriculture without really altering the underlying strategies of mobility and accumulation. It is this contradiction, according to Berry, that heralded a trend towards peasant solidarity and militant opposition to the existing political and economic order witnessed in the Agbekoya farmer's revolts.

The political consequence of the advent of crude oil was starkly manifested in the spontaneity with which the emphasis shifted politically from the Regional (later State) Governments to the Federal Government, a situation that raised the stakes of contests for access into, and control of the political and administrative infrastructures of the centre, and turned it to a zero-sum, do-or-die affair. The first sneak preview to the 'fight-to-finish' character of power and authority trig-

gered the unsuccessful Biafran secession which plunged the country into three years of destructive civil war. With the benefit of hindsight, it is implausible to ignore the geopolitical and military calculations of the warring factions in relations to the control of the fabled oil deposits in the Niger Delta. Since then, the unspoken mind sets among political entrepreneurs across the federating ethnic units has been that whoever controls the oil-rich Niger Delta controls the proverbial honey pot. In the final analysis, rather than create a basis for balanced growth and development, oil has blurred the cognitive vision of the national elite to come to terms with the profundity of the crises facing the nation-state project in Nigeria. This development is a major tragedy given the manner in which clientilism bankrupts the country and shortchanges the ability to guarantee stability outside the framework of official repression (Ukeje et. al. 2002b).

To expand and effectively secure oil-based accumulation, successive governments have employed a repertoire of militaristic options: intimidation, incarceration, repression, and extra-judicial killings in order to quell uprisings and disturbances among oil communities. The interminable list of state sponsorship of repression against protesting oil communities began in 1990 against Umuechem villagers when the SPDC invited soldiers and anti-riot policemen to intervene. In the wake of this curious invitation, troops behaved much like occupation armies sworn to drawing 'the last drop of the enemy's blood'. They committed acts of arson, looted and damaged property, injured, raped women and young girls, and murdered harmless inhabitants, including children and old people. Although it is not the worst affected, the brutality inflicted on the Ogoni community under the Abacha regime has become another sad milestone signifying the extent that Nigerian State is willing and able to go in order to impose such a tenuous form of order and stability necessary for the undisrupted extraction of crude oil (Osaghae 1995). Indeed, as recently as 1999, the Washington-based Human Rights Watch (HRW) blamed oil companies for their pretentious claims of not being privy to, or in a position to avert, what was happening around them. After all, they are the direct beneficiaries of such crude attempts to suppress militant actions in their areas of operation.

It is important to summarise two important strands in the mobilisation of oil communities that intensified in the 1990s (Ukeje 2001; 2002a). One is the mounting awareness among the oil communities that their struggles cannot be isolated from the larger global discourse similar to those embarked upon by indigenous and minority ethnic populations against the intrusive impacts of international capital and globalisation. This consciousness, it is important to note, has provided the justification for popular violent protests aimed at redressing prevailing socio-economic, environmental and political injustices. The second strand derives from the fact that communities are moving away from previously isolated, informal and reactive forms of social protest to more structured, formalised and institutionalised interventions, exemplified by the proliferation of self-help move-

ments and organisations throughout the Delta. There is no doubt, for instance, that Itsekiri and Ijaw women who recently embarked on protests benefited from these local, national and global resources, experiences, knowledge, consciousness and information about other experiences elsewhere. Turner (2001)<sup>4</sup> has demonstrated the utility of such civil society-based transnational alliances and networking, and how such can be of immense benefits to oil communities confronting giant multinationals by pointing to a recent encounter between the Ogbodo community and Shell over a pipeline explosion that resulted in 18-day long oil spillage. According to Turner, Shell's 'extremely inadequate response left the community with almost no drinking water, and nothing for cooking food, washing dishes, clothes or their bodies'. By the time the company offered compensation of 100,000 US Dollars to pacify the 150,000 strong community, the chiefs' counter claim was to ask Shell for copies of the full agreements with the last five communities into which Shell had spilled crude oil which are located in Western Europe and North America. The Ogbodo chiefs intended to seek comparable long-term reparations.

One of the strongest accounts of the genealogy of contemporary conflicts in the Niger Delta blamed the dialectics of globalisation and local resistance: the profit motive versus the survival of the people, as principally responsible for the contradictions of underdevelopment and conflicts in the Niger Delta (Obi 1997, 2001). The truth, undoubtedly, is what persistently irks oil communities is the reluctance by oil companies to openly accept culpability and responsibility for environmental degradation, and to take responsibility for alleviating the plight of the host communities. The companies often claim that they are not in the business of *Santa Claus* or of interfering with the principal duties, responsibilities, and constituencies of government. They ignore the fact that their corporate activities and inactions, if nothing else, compromise the well-being of host communities; and that only by engaging in socially responsible corporate behaviour can they enjoy cordial community relations necessary for rewarding business. This non-committal corporate attitude is shared by most of the multinational oil companies operating in the Niger Delta as exemplified by the insistence in 1993 by the SPDC that

The most important contribution that the company can make to the social and material progress of Nigeria is performing efficiently its direct line of business. It is neither feasible nor proper for the company to preempt the responsibilities of the federal or state governments in providing and maintaining social amenities and services (Cited in Ojo 2002: 39).

It is precisely this attitude of corporate aloofness and insensitivity on the part of oil companies that has intensified social frustration, anomie and violent conflict in host oil communities across the Niger Delta of Nigeria.

### **Gender Identity and the Discourse of Social Protest by Women in the Niger Delta**

Two critical and interrelated facets have been poorly articulated, or sometimes, outright omitted in existing discourses on the response of communities to the crisis within the oil region of the Niger Delta. The first is how such conflicts affect women, while the second relates to the specific ways and manners in which women themselves struggle for an improved environment to carry out their productive (and reproductive) activities. In the later instance, conventional wisdom has significantly undervalued women's contributions by pursuing two sets of interrelated, but misleading assumptions. The first suggests that women are patently non-political citizens, assuming that their preoccupation is primarily with domestic, household issues, or the 'politics of the belly'. From this perspective, it is claimed on behalf of women that the terrains of local and national politics are too turbulent for women to participate effectively, even though that is the same site where authoritative value, wealth and power are negotiated and distributed. Such notions of inaccessibility are misinformed, giving the reality of the blurring dichotomy between private and public spaces. A deeper structural explanation for this pervasive assumption must be located within the dominant regime of patriarchy manifested in the superstructures of social, economic, institutional and traditional taboos, myths, and stereotypes constructed to blunt popular consciousness and awareness among women. Fall-outs become obvious in terms of the legion of visible and invisible barriers that are erected to frustrate and prevent women from autonomous political expression and association outside of the framework and structures constructed and imposed by men. In any case, processes of socialisation and differentiation from childhood through adulthood have served to entrench and perpetuate intricate networks of subservience and subordination. Consoling, of course, is that significant incremental advances are now ensuring that those boundaries and barriers are collapsing or losing their social utility and relevance. But there is still considerable scope for improvement. It is instructively obvious also, that in the broad sense such assumptions serve to engage womanhood in the template of victim-hood rather than that of a distinct gender group with autonomous agencies for negotiating social processes and other priorities (Ibeanu 2001).

Historically, the Niger Delta (in fact, southern Nigeria in general) was one of the nine major sites of African resistance to colonial rule. The most significant of the strategies adopted in those early times included crop hold-ups, tax evasions and boycotts, industrial actions, worker demonstrations, establishment of independent African churches as well as cultural/ welfare organisations, deliberately breaking the monopoly of European businesses, sporadic revolts and protests, and sustained armed struggles. (Ekwe-Ekwe 2001). Even though autonomous politically significant social protests by women were rare and far apart during

those times, they certainly existed. One example was the Aba riots or women's war of 1929 precipitated by the anticipated taxation of women integral to the implementation of the Indirect Rule project of British colonialism in Nigeria (Afigbo 1966; JAH 1930: 542–43). The impracticality of the Native Revenue Ordinance (NRO) that mandated the imposition of taxation was such that it was preceded by a detailed assessment of people's wealth for the purpose of taxation, as well as a census of population, livestock, as well as economic trees. For a long time, however, the incorrect assumption was that taxation alone triggered the wave of women's protests that began from Aba. A closer investigation reveals that beyond taxation were a litany of other complaints, such as discontent with persecution, extortion, corruption and practices of Native Court members, the autocracy and high-handedness of appointed Warrant Chiefs, illegal and oppressive sanitary fines, continuance and enforcement of unpaid labour on civil construction, unfair or excessive imprisonment, and the abysmal low prices of farm produces (especially palm oil and palm kernel) as well as exorbitant prices on imported goods (especially tobacco and spirits) – both of which threatened or eroded the purchasing power of most families (Afigbo 1972; Arifalo 2001). It is interesting that a year earlier, in 1928, men in different parts of southeastern Nigeria had, without raising a finger, grudgingly succumbed to what was widely accepted as too repressive a taxation regime. In the final analysis, the women's protest became a rude awakening that not only jolted colonial administrators but also forced a reevaluation of this controversial piece of legislation.

The respected historian, Obaro Ikime, has rightly pointed out that the Aba protests were even more significant and complex than has often been portrayed in history textbooks, especially as the upheavals were 'protests against the sum total of grievances associated with contemporary British administrative practices and the allied inroads of western civilization' (Ikime 1980:444). The demonstrations began on 18 November 1929, and lasted almost three months until January the following year. Within a short period they spread to several areas: four divisions in the Province of Owerri, two out of the three divisions in Calabar Province, and to Afikpo division in Ogoja Province. A closer look at the spread of the protests reveals the less obvious reality that the demonstrations occurred most intensely along important trade and market routes dominated, if not altogether controlled, by itinerant women traders. As rightly pointed out by Ajayi and Espie (1965: 203, 394), this prevalence of markets and long distance trading encouraged interaction among women from different backgrounds outside of the prying eyes of and control by men. This is particularly interesting when it is borne in mind that in most traditional African societies, markets are important beyond serving as sites for buying and selling. They also serve as focal points for frequent social, political and cultural contacts, as most social engagements and arrangements are organised around market days.

Another celebrated case of a women's revolt occurred between 1941-1947 during which Egba matriarchs staged a drawn-out project of civil disobedience, demonstration and insurrection against colonial exploitation, taxation, market closures and commodity hold-ups. This culminated, ultimately, in the kidnapping of colonial officials and their local agents, as well as the dethronement of the traditional ruler, the Alake. The protests that broke out and spread widely caught the colonial administration in the southeast and southwest of Nigeria (and also the men) unawares, demonstrating that with determination women could embark on autonomous social actions outside the framework determined by their male counterparts.

What we know about the motives behind the revolt by the women is still very sketchy. In many fascinating respects, however, the protests cannot be ignored as they have become remarkable milestones in the long struggles by oil communities in the Niger Delta for access to subsidised socio-economic opportunities, environmental justice, political equality<sup>5</sup> as well as respect for democratic, human and minority rights. What is certain, based on my own internal knowledge of the Niger Delta as a result of intensive fieldwork, media accounts, and interviews with some of the women's leaders, is that all three occurred without the knowledge of male opinion-makers and traditional leaders as the women claimed to have declined taking them into confidence for fear of sabotage.<sup>6</sup> Another leader claimed that the women 'decided to take the driver's seat to make the Federal Government and the oil companies more sensitive to the yearnings and aspirations of our people'. The women also argued that in the past

Our youths used to do this for us but the government and the oil companies would label them terrorists, mobilise soldiers to trail and kill them. But this time around, harmless women are in charge; let us hear their next story. Maybe, they would say we are armed invaders. We would send our children to school, when they complete their studies, they cannot get work, yet outsiders come here and they get jobs with relative ease. We are suffering...<sup>7</sup>

Overall, the protests and peaceful occupation of oil installations point unmistakably to autonomous, gender-specific action as against the conventional community (or youth) protests so prevalent in the oil Delta. Indeed, as one of the leaders of the Ijaw protesters, Madam Wariya, claimed, the women decided not to inform anyone, not even their leaders for fear of 'sabotage'. In addition to the markedly solo efforts of the women, their protests were marked by the non-violent but resolute manner in which they were conducted. Indeed, apart from symbolically carrying household utensils such as cooking pots, plates, pestles, frying pans, long spoons, and chanting protest songs, their only other 'weapon' seemed to be the moral undertone of their defiance. As one of the women's

leader bluntly claimed: 'the Federal Government and the oil companies... like to oppress us. Since we are already suffering, we did not mind if we died on the flow stations'.<sup>8</sup>

The Itsekiri women of Ugborodo demanded, among other things, employment opportunities for their husbands and children, provision of basic social amenities such as drinking water, electricity, health care and education facilities, compensations for environmentally irresponsible oil-field practices, and assistance towards creating small-scale income-generating enterprises for women. Apart from making the usual demands, their Ijaw counterparts also insisted on the payment of N500 million compensation in return for long years of neglect of their communities, the construction of two ultra-modern palaces for the Gbaramatu and Egbema Kingdoms, the construction of foreshore walls and housing projects in about nine host communities to improve the environmental and living conditions of the people, land reclamation, and electrification.<sup>9</sup> The protesters also reportedly demanded the renaming of two of the facilities, Abiteye and Otunana flow stations, to reflect their Ijaw origin.<sup>10</sup> Some of these demands dovetail neatly with the 18-point demands adopted by a consultative meeting of Niger Delta women held in far-away Banjul, the capital of The Gambia, from 7-12 August 2000, to review the situation in the Delta, especially as it affected women.<sup>11</sup> According to the meeting, government and oil companies must commit themselves to legal and peaceful means in addressing the myriad plights of oil communities and women; abrogate all laws inimical to the development of the Niger Delta; put in place a comprehensive blueprint for genuine development in the region; end the militarisation of the Niger Delta; compensate victims of past military occupation and repression; compensate victims of oil spillages and fire disasters; and introduce micro-credit schemes for the development of small-scale enterprises for women.

The defiance of the women protesters forced the company to invoke a *force majeure* clause in its contracts with exporters on Sunday, 21 July. In monetary terms such disruptions must have caused the NNPC/ ChevronTexaco Joint Venture partnership heavy losses, but it also served to accelerate the search for prompt and peaceful negotiations and resolution.<sup>12</sup> As negotiations commenced with the management of ChevronTexaco at Abiteye flow station, the Ijaw women protesters vehemently refused to vacate the oil platforms until each of the 10 communities were paid 2 million Naira (about 11, 000 U.S. Dollars) 'as compensation for the women who abandoned their various trades to occupy the flow stations'. The protesters also reportedly asked for a N20 million micro-credit loans scheme for each of the ten communities to enable the women to embark on small and medium scale enterprises after the siege, to be administered by a non-governmental organisation conversant with the operation of such an economic empowerment scheme. They also demanded more permanent jobs for indigenes.<sup>13</sup>

The demands of the women were no doubt 'bread-and-butter' in nature. Ordinarily such grievances are only known to eventually translate into public protest when they are mediated by what Kurzman (1996: 154) referred to as 'cognitive liberation' - that is, when an oppressed people break out of the pessimistic and quiescent patterns of thought and begin to do something about 'their situation'. In another sense, there is wisdom in the opinion that whereas social conflicts may be triggered by the denial of tangible resources, they are complicated by structurally embedded questions of identity. Indeed, as Fischer (1990: 95) pointed out, the centrality of identity is fundamental to the etiology of conflicts; especially in so far that it 'influences a great deal of social interaction at the group, intergroup and international levels'. This explains why the management and resolution of violent social conflicts tend at times to become intractable for the simple reason that fundamental identity questions often prove difficult to address. Rothchild reached a similar conclusion when he observed that social interest groups make two types of demands: negotiable demands, which tend to be 'elastic and modest in resource cost and to be accepting of the legitimacy of the political order in which they are asserted'; and non-negotiable demands, which concern their 'cultural identity status, participation, political and physical survival or other intangibles...' (Rothchild 1997: 209-213). In his opinion, 'when issues of identity and participation, or of basic personal privilege are at stake, and when the actions of one group infringe on the privacy or identity of others', the demands may be transformed into non-negotiable claims on the part of both state and state-linked civil associations. (See Rothchild, in Zartman 1997: 197-241).

What seemed like a sudden implosion of gender identity among women in the Niger Delta falls within the above genre. Perhaps, then, there is wisdom in the recent opinion expressed by Sideris (2001) in a different context that social conflicts and repression shape the identities of man and woman in significantly different ways that are not captured in the discourse on social conflicts. 'Identity' here is conceived in terms of 'contingency, agency and fluidity' - each of which questions the received wisdom about the role of women in social protest and violence. Like other identities, gender identities are socially constructed and influenced by opportunities and constraints that invariably are mediated by 'material conditions, local discourses and ideologies'. Such specific identities are also constructed from the way social forces relate with women, revealing not only that being a woman does not equate to non-belligerence but also that women are affected by violent conflicts in ways significantly different from their male counterparts. As we have been reminded, those who claim that mothering is a requirement for political naivety ignore also that it can also be a fundamental source of resilience that can galvanise social action with far reaching political implications. (Sideris 2001: 50). What comes out strongly from this theoretical exposition is the need to come to terms with and understand how women internalise, interpret

and respond to the contradictions of oil-based accumulation, as well as their predisposition towards self-reliant efforts aimed at resisting subordination, exploitation, and marginalisation of the kinds so prevalent in the oil region of Nigeria.

What is then presented in the form of spontaneous (or sporadic) identity mobilisation by Niger Delta women can best be understood in the context of a prolonged disillusionment with the dominant male identity that has become inefficient, defective, maligned, compromised and unreliable in drawing attention to and seeking a reversal to the misfortunes of the oil communities. The question that should then be asked more forcefully is: in what ways have the contradictions and conflicts arising from oil production created, altered, and transformed the identity of women as distinct from those of men (and the larger community) in the oil region of Nigeria?

There is nothing novel about the occupation of oil installations by the women, as such options have become somewhat of a metaphor for the expression of grievances and powerlessness on the part of aggrieved oil communities. Perhaps much more than men, oil exploration activities have been shown to have adverse effects on women in the Niger Delta. This is not only so because they are socially more sedentary, or because they are constrained by labour-related migrations, but more importantly due to the fact that their involvement in fishing and farming forms a significant proportion of household income in those communities. Drawing on the experiences of women across the six research locations, a recent report 'Oil and Violence in the Niger Delta'<sup>14</sup> identified some real challenges facing women as a result of the negative impact of oil production. According to the report, the expansion and intensification of oil-related activities have significantly diminished women's access to pollution-free farmlands and fishing waters. With access to gainful socio-economic opportunities and activities often blocked, many women reportedly take up informal prostitution as a strategy for livelihood or survival (i.e. engaging in casual sex with oil workers who are ready to part with some of their high salaries). This may not be unconnected with the alarming rates of sexual promiscuity, girl-child pregnancies and single parenting, and sexually transmitted diseases among young women.

At the surface, of course, are bread-and-butter issues such as the lack of employment opportunities for their husbands and children, inaccessibility to small-scale income generating activities, basic health care facilities, educational institutions, and many others of socio-economic, environmental and political natures and/or ramifications. For instance, there is neither electricity nor portable drinking water in Ode-Ugborodo and six others where ChevronTexaco has been in operation for about thirty years. The only one of the Ugborodo communities with electricity is Ogidigben, and that is because the offices of the oil company are located there.<sup>15</sup> The women are frustrated by what they perceive as the reck-

less exploitation and criminal neglect of their communities by government and oil companies whom so far have merely paid lip-service to investing heavily in human and infrastructural developments aimed at alleviating the plight of oil communities.

Underneath these obvious grievances, however, are others that are subtly related but of deeper, far-reaching meaning. These are the notions of boundary and identity - two equally potent sources of violent conflicts in many developing societies. One fascinating but often ignored lesson from the Ugborodo women's revolt is instructive as it sufficiently demonstrates the centrality of these notions in the articulation of protest and conflicts. For the local women protesters, the multi-million dollars Escravos terminal represents the worst facet of capitalist exploitation among inhabitants of a weak social formation lacking the resources and wherewithal to negotiate favourable terms of engagement with international capital. This representation has a historical antecedent: the site of the oil terminal itself used to be the final 'loading' point for slaves destined for the Americas. Indeed, the name 'Escravos' has no parallel in the socio-linguistic and cultural frameworks of the local inhabitants for it means a slave depot or market in Portuguese. This point must be borne in mind as the local women who carried out the protest and siege on the terminal hardly mentioned 'Escravos', but preferred 'Ugborodo' - their community's ancestral Benin name. Of course, if Escravos represented the worst of slave capitalism in the early colonial epoch, it evokes even worse psychologically depressing meanings today as an infrastructure of exploitation, marginalisation and exclusion occasioned by the incestuous alliance between oil multinationals and the Nigerian State.<sup>16</sup>

It is important to recall that the architecture that sustained the rapacious extraction capabilities of international capital in Nigeria transformed at critical historical junctures through concrete changes in global regimes of production and consumption. In the case of the Niger Delta, the transitions in production relations occurred along three successive historical trajectories demarcated by the eras of slavery, oil palm and crude oil productions. This periodisation must also be qualified by recalling emphatically that nothing changed in the appetite for crass accumulation, sometimes through brute force, by national and foreign business elites in their quest for self-aggrandizement, class reproduction and survival. What the literature tends to overlook, again, is that very little substantive changes occurred in the nature, character, and behaviour of local forces; either in terms of mobilising social identities or in using such identities to challenge, negate or disengage from the contradictions of accumulation. We only need to place the legion of complaints against the monopolistic Royal Niger Company (RNC) by Nembe Brass people of Akassa prior to the attack on the company's factory almost a century ago, in 1895, side by side with those presently pursued by oil communities against multinational oil to appreciate the powerful elements of

continuity in the dimensions and characteristics of communities' revolts against international capital in the present-day Delta region. (Jones 1963; Alagoa 1964).

The Nembe Brass people had persistently and bitterly complained against the closure and control of the lucrative oil market in the hinterland. It was a situation that triggered economic hardship for the coastal middlemen. Several entreaties and emissaries were made to the company as well as to the colonial administration, including to Consul MacDonald when he returned to establish the government of the Niger Coast Protectorate in 1891. Unfortunately, all these fell on deaf ears until an attack on the RNC depot on January 29, 1895. Three factors finally impelled and provoked Nembe chiefs to war. In the first instance, the RNC embarked on series of unprovoked (but provocative) attacks on Nembe people of Akassa whether they were carrying trade goods or merely foodstuff. In the process, people were killed and wounded, while the abandoned canoes and their contents were confiscated. Second, the RNC also warned other Ijaw communities not to pay any debts owed to Nembe men. Lastly, there was evidence that certain company servants taunted the people and treated them brutally, telling them that they would be forced to eat dust. Alagoa also reported an allegation against a Captain Christian, who ordered a woman to be stripped naked and covered with tar. (Alagoa 1964: 94). In the face of these provocations, the Brass people never hid their disdain for the RNC, openly swearing they would rather die than 'eat dust' as personnel of the company had openly taunted. In many ways, the situation at that time bore close similarities to events in the contemporary Niger Delta. Even to suggest that contemporary rebellions lack historical roots reveals an erroneous comprehension of history, especially of societies characterised by 'severely limited opportunities for indigenous participation in political, economic and cultural affairs'.

This is so in much of post-colonial Africa, making public spaces to transform into sites of marginalisation, exclusion, and plural violence (Mbembe 2001). In the prevailing post Cold War global order, as Ake argued, the intrusive impacts of globalisation have created a phenomenal orientational upheaval, anxiety and identity crisis. Rather than help secure the continent, therefore, such phenomena have intensified insecurity within the continent. (Ake 1995: 19-42). The seminal works of writers such as Scott, and Wolf awakens us to the reality that a peasant population like those in the Niger Delta can no longer be viewed as an 'object of history' (Skocpol 1982: 351-375). Whereas Scott linked peasant revolutions to the cultural and social-organisational autonomy of peasants to resist the intrusive impacts of hegemony ruling elite, Wolf noted that ultimately, the decisive factor in making a peasant rebellion possible lies in the relationship of the peasantry to the field of power which surrounds it. Accordingly, a peasant rebellion is most unlikely to start from 'a situation of complete impotence'. Arendt also reminded us in a broader theoretical context, that 'violence appears as an alter-

nate to institutionalized political influence - the voice of the voiceless, the ultimate, and often effective insistence of the deprived in being taken into account' (Mitchell 1996: 156-7).

There are no doubts that past levels of protest increase current protest activities, just as there are established links between official repression and escalation of community protests. It is here that the value of culture defined as lived traditions binding people as a result of shared memories of the past and collective destiny for the future becomes an essential instrument for politicised identity mobilisation in general, and the salience of the protests by women in the Niger Delta, in particular. After all, 'a culture includes the "map of meaning", which makes things intelligible to its members' (Kofman and Williams 1989: 1-23). Galtung developed this linkage between culture and violence further in his thesis on 'cultural violence' defined as 'those aspects of culture, the symbolic sphere of our existence...that can be used to justify or legitimize direct and structural violence' (p. 39). The exploitation of basic needs, according to him, is the root source of the prevalent and archetypal violent structure through which consciousness formation and mobilisation are impeded. Exploitation comes in four different patterns: penetration, that is, implanting a top dog over the underdog; segmentation, that is, giving the underdog only a partial view of what obtains; marginalization, keeping the underdog outside; and finally, fragmentation, that is, keeping the underdogs away from each other (1999: 42). Earlier, Galtung captured the conditions of structural violence in which the poor are denied decent and dignified lives because their basic physical and mental capacities are constrained by hunger, poverty, inequality, and exclusion. (Galtung 1969; Uvin 2000). Incidentally, these aspects of exploitation are so deep and widespread even as they transform the gender domains of women in Nigeria's oil region.

As the protests that greeted the colonial policies of taxation as well as those against international mercantile capitalism have shown, a history of women's resistance to perceived injustices is not new. There are smaller, isolated revolts by Niger Delta women that are, cumulatively, important, but will not detain us here. Two major uprisings solely by women that occurred in the 1980s are however pertinent. First, there was the 1984 Ogharefe women's uprising which took place in the Ethiope local government council. Second was one embarked upon by Ekpan women in the Okpe council area in 1986. Both communities are predominantly from Urhobo ethnic groups, but their protests against a US oil corporation, Pan-Ocean, were impelled by separate circumstances in two different contexts related to the fact that oil-based capitalism 'not only breaks up women's social order but also created or strengthened the conditions for resistance' (Turner and Oshare 1994: 123-60). Yet, according to them, the 1984 uprising succeeded largely because, arising out of their frustration with their financial compensation for pollution and alienation from farmland, the women were able to mobilise *en-*

*masse* at the corporation's production site, and in a rare display of collective nudity as a weapon of protest 'threw off their clothes and with this curse won their demands' (Ibid., p.123). The second uprising reportedly failed because it was embroiled with wider class and ethnicity-mediated concerns and interests. According to the same authors, the template for both initiatives by women was made possible by existing gender solidarity, consciousness and identity. The analysis of the women's uprisings, in summary, yields three salient facts. First is that they were clashes resulting from class formation spurred by oil-based capitalist development. Second is that the gender character of the uprisings followed from changes in gender relations that took place in the process of oil-based capitalist development. Last is that the degree of success enjoyed by women in their struggles reflects both the extent to which peasant relations persisted or were eroded by proletarianisation, and the degree to which men acted in solidarity with women. Influenced by Boserup's (1970: 126) insightful theoretical construct on how the expansion of capitalism disempowered women in peripheral social formations, Turner and Oshare, argued that

...in Nigeria not only did capitalism break up women's social order but it also created or strengthened the conditions for resistance. The uprisings are products of capitalist development just as much as is women's marginalisation.

The late 1980s and 1990s witnessed even more gender-based protests by women across many oil communities in the Delta region, especially against the background of a biting socio-economic crisis (Elson 1989; Ihonvbere 1993; Obi 1997). It is instructive to recall the critical roles played by Ogoni women and groups in the course of the struggles embarked upon by their community during much of the first half of the 1990s. In 1995, women seized the Odidi oil well owned by Shell in protest against the destruction of economic crops as a result of an oil spill over 10 days. In September 1998, a large assemblage of Egi women marched on the Obite gas plant, the largest in West Africa, owned by the French multinational oil company, ELF. As the women approached the site, a detachment of anti-riot mobile police barricaded the entrance to the company ensuring that all the women could do was to sing and dance as a means of making their message heard. In the end, their demand for the relocation of one particular senior security personnel of the company was heeded.

### Conclusion

Despite the restoration of civilian rule after a long and tiring period of autocratic military rule, the widespread crisis of authority arising from people's loss of faith in the prevailing order has not changed positively in any fundamental way. Recently, Human Rights Watch warned that the end of military rule in Nigeria has brought little benefit to the people living in the oil producing communities of the

Niger Delta. In fact, the level of discontent among the inhabitants remains very high, leading to frequent protests against oil companies and government (HRW 2002). Rather than lessening, violent protests and conflict have intensified in various parts of the country since the inauguration of the Fourth Republic under the Olusegun Obasanjo Presidency.

Beginning from May 29, 1999 when the inauguration ceremonies were in full swing in the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja, various ethnic factions in Warri were up in arms against one another- as usual, over the question of ownership of the oil-rich city. In another case, the administration demonstrated how it planned to react to the surge of violent conflicts in the Oil Delta when it ordered troops to raze the village of Odi, close to Yenogoa, the capital of Bayelsa State, as a reprisal for the killing of seven soldiers by bandits terrorizing the village and its neighbours (Ukeje 2001a). Such insensitivities and lack of concrete policy responses on the part of government confirm the view that acts of protest tend to escalate into violent conflicts because official responses are more likely to be diversionary and repressive than reformist (Gurr 1995: 215).

Despite the bleak prospects for peace and stability in the Niger Delta, it is impossible to resist the temptation that more than any other time in Nigeria's post-independence history, the present civilian administration of President Obasanjo has a good chance of alleviating the myriad plights of the inhabitants of oil communities. But that will require demonstrating sincere and genuine political will beyond the usual rhetoric. The new government would seem to have taken one step in the right direction when it acknowledge in a *Note Verbale* reference 127/2000 to the 28th session of the African Commission on Human and Peoples Rights held in Cotonou, Benin, that gross violations of human rights were committed by past regimes and that atrocities are still being committed in the Niger Delta.<sup>17</sup> There is no question that the government must translate such an acknowledgement into concrete restitutions to oil communities who continue to suffer the debilitating effects of crude oil exploitation and state repression. Unfortunately, there is a serious shortfall in terms of translating public rhetoric into concrete blueprints for development as witnessed, for instance, by the way government authorised military reprisals against the entire Odi village near Yenogoa in Ijaw-dominated Bayelsa State, for the criminal murder of some policemen by bandits. Also, there are genuine complaints that the much-taunted institutional framework for the integrated development of the oil basin, the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC), may suffer the same fate as its predecessors – the Niger Delta Development Board (NDDB) and the Oil Minerals Producing and Development Commission (OMPADEC). It would seem that this new creation is another 'jobs for the boys' as there are complaints that the NDDC can only further institutionalise the culture of patronage and clientilism with little, if anything, to show for the huge sums of money allocated to it.

By way of conclusion, there is a growing undercurrent of opinion that women may be able to forge a pan-Niger Delta alliance across the six oil-producing states in Nigeria, an expectation that has so far failed to materialise among the various ethnic and sub-ethnic groups in that region.<sup>18</sup> Already, the Lagos-based *Vanguard* newspaper recently reported ongoing consultations among various women leaders in oil communities across the Delta to stage a week-long co-coordinated protest on all oil installations in the six major oil producing states. The main objective of this pan-Niger Delta alliance, according to the paper, will be to paralyse oil exploration activities in the Niger Delta and by so doing, force government and oil companies to act promptly and decisively to alleviate the plight of oil communities. While on the surface this is appealing, it is unlikely to come to fruition in the near future based on past attempts and the deep ethnic fault-lines that existing among the various social and ethnic groups in the region.<sup>19</sup> Many doubts have been raised regarding the staying power of new social movements of the nature that are emerging in the oil region. Beyond this is the question mark on the long term utility, durability and effectiveness of women's socio-political interventions beyond the moral and symbolic notions they articulate. This question arises out of the widespread scepticism that women's interventions are too temporary and eventually lose steam as they reveal their powerlessness in the face of real challenges and reprisals (Amin 1993: 87). This note of caution does not diminish taking wise counsel from the idiom of the man and the pursuing fowl.

### Notes

1. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the fourth plenary session of the 10th CODESRIA General Assembly held in Kampala, Uganda, from 8–12 December 2002. I wish to thank Drs. Amina Mama, Charmaine Pereira, Joy Ezeilo, for their comments, and Professor Adetanwa Odebiyi of the Department of Sociology, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria, for reacting to earlier drafts.
2. Two oil communities each were selected from three oil-producing States – Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa and Delta. Cf. Charles Ukeje, Adetanwa Odebiyi, Amadu Sesay and Olabisi Aina, 'Oil and Violent Conflicts in the Niger Delta', CEDCOMS Monograph Series No. 1, 2002.
3. The enormity of the logistic troubles that the women went through to carry out the operation can only be appreciated when it is realised that the Escravos facility is entirely located on an island surrounded by creeks, swamps, and the Atlantic Ocean to the south. Indeed, employees of ChevronTexaco posted to the site arrive and leave by helicopter or fast boats.
4. Teresa Turner, 'The Land is Dead: Women's Rights as Human Rights: The case of the Ogbodo Shell Petroleum Spill in Rivers State, Nigeria', June–July 2001.
5. The issue of political domination and exclusion of women, even at the grass-roots, traditional level, was alluded to by a woman respondent from Elebele, Bayelsa State, in the report published by the Centre for Development and Conflict Man-

agement Studies, CEDCOMS. According to the respondent, 'Our society does not give any role to women. Women are mostly to care for children at home, and cannot be present where men hold meetings or take political decisions. A woman here, whatever her age is treated as a minor. Even a mother cannot talk where her own son is part of, or presiding over a meeting'. (p. 25).

6. 'Ijaw Vs Chevron: Women to the Rescue', *ThisDay*, August 2, 2002.
7. 'Resource Control: Tension as Niger Delta Women Plan Another Mass Protest', *Vanguard*, August 3, 2002.
8. Statement credited to the traditional Prime Minister of the Gbaramatu Kingdom, Chief Wellington Okrika.
9. To forestall a hostage situation, ChevronTexaco preemptively evacuated personnel from Ewan Production platform, located eight kilometers offshore Ondo State, following invasion by Ilajes in the area. The company claimed that the protesters were not from their areas of production. See 'Chevron Evacuates Staff From Oil Field Besieged By Ilaje Women', *ThisDay* (Lagos), August 17, 2002.
10. Claims to ownership of land, especially with proven deposits of crude oil has been a major bone of contention among oil communities, especially as 'legitimate' owners can then claim compensation and occasionally obtain favours from oil companies. See Frynas George Jedrez, 'A Socio-Legal Approach to Natural Resource Conflicts: Environmental Impact of Oil Operations on Village Communities in Nigeria'. Paper presented at the 'African Environments: Past and Present' Conference sponsored by the *Journal of Southern African Studies* and St. Anthony's College, University of Oxford, 5–8 July 1999; For list of demands, see 'Ijaw Women Demand N500m Compensation From Chevron', *This Day*, July 19, 2002; 'The Picketing of Chevron', *The News* (Lagos) August 5, 2002; 'Women Occupy Chevron/Texaco Facilities in the Niger Delta', *Drillbits and Tailings*, volume 7, number 6, July 31, 2002.
11. The meeting was held under the auspices of International Alert, a renowned environmental watchdog active in the oil sector.
12. There are conflicting figures about the exact monetary costs of the closure of the Escravos loading facility per day. According to *Drillbits and Tailings*, it could amount to a calculated daily revenue loss of US\$7.8 million. See, 'Women Occupy Chevron/Texaco Facilities in the Niger Delta', *Drillbits and Tailings*, volume 7, number 6, July 31, 2002.
13. 'As Chevron Moves to Resume Production in Escravos...' *ThisDay*, Lagos, July 25, 2002.
14. Focus Group Discussion Extract, Field Survey, 2000 (Cf. Charles Ukeje, Adetanwa Odebiyi, Amadu Sesay and Olabisi Aina, 'Oil and Violent Conflicts in the Niger Delta', CEDCOMS. Monograph Series No. 1, 2002.
15. For details, see 'Women Protesters Sack Chevron's Export Terminal', in *The Punch*, Lagos, July 10, 2002, p. 9.

16. I would like to thank Dr. Charmaine Pereira, researcher at the Centre for Research and Documentation (CRD), Kano, Nigeria, for introducing me to this very important, but definitely ignored, historical connection and reality.
17. See *MOSOP Press Release*, June 20, 2002. For full text of the ruling of the African Court of Human and People's Rights, visit <http://www.cesr.org/ESCR/africancommission.html>.
18. See 'N-Delta Women's Protest Were Against Vicious Cycle of Injustice – Clark', *Vanguard*, Lagos, August 18, 2002. It is important to note that Government has fuelled the controversy over the exact number of States comprising the Niger Delta. While the core Niger Delta States are Delta, Bayelsa and Rivers States, the official gazette establishing the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) added six more: Abia, Akwa Ibom, Cross River, Edo, Imo and Edo States. By so doing, the Niger Delta, in official parlance, has become coterminous with oil-producing states. See Federal Republic of Nigeria, *Official Gazette* on 'A Bill for an Act to Establish the Niger-Delta Development Commission, 1999'. N. 46, V. 86, 12 July, 1999, Lagos: The Federal Government Press.
19. 'We've Been Pushed to the Wall – Mabiaku', *Vanguard*, Lagos, August 17, 2002.

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