



Original article

Contingent relations, cult(ure)s of respectability and youth mobilisation in the oil rich Niger Delta[☆]

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the subtle influences that respectability and contingent action exert on the self imagination and social mobilisation of youth. Placing the analysis within the context of the politics of oil extraction in Nigeria's Niger Delta, the paper uses field data to show how the temporalities of ageing currently shape respectability within Delta youthspheres and how provisionality serves as a central vehicle for social navigation.

1. Introduction

Social mobilisation in the Niger Delta revolves around the political economy of extraction and the various pressure points through which competing actors stake their claims against the Nigerian oil industry. These pressures range from resource distribution, to environmental and resource rights, and livelihood challenges created by the ubiquitous oil sector. Youth is often right at the centre of receiving both the worst of the pressures as well as championing resistance to it. As is to be expected, social and political action around these issues have been key entry points through which both popular and academic observers have attempted to understand and explain the Niger Delta (Obi, 2009; Oluwaniyi, 2010; Iwilade, 2014).

But for all of the Delta literature's robust engagement with social mobilisation in the region, many of the less visible forms of social mobilisation are often lost in a narrative dominated by overt resistance, marginalisation and repression. This article focuses on two neglected aspects of youth's social mobilisation. One is the subtle but powerful politics of respectability, which shapes behaviour within youth cults and gangs in interesting ways. There is also considerable evidence that social mobilisation is often dependent on provisional (even fortuitous) actions which build contingent networks that are able to navigate the uncertain social conditions imposed by the oil economy. These two dimensions help the youth to imagine themselves as well as mobilise against the state and oil multinationals – but also sometimes in defence of this very same alliance.

The article explores local concepts of respectability and manhood, the tensions that temporality and ageing impose on them and how they

aid social mobilisation among youth actors engaged in violence. It also links temporality to the building of contingent network relations and shows how these shape new forms of social mobilisation in the Niger Delta. The article is based on fieldwork research carried out in two main sites in the Niger Delta. The first is a neighbourhood of the oil city of Port Harcourt that local youth refer to as *Colombia*, particularly the areas around Niger, Bende and Victoria streets. The second site is in Yenagoa, the capital of the oil state of Bayelsa as well as the small town of Ekeremor also in Bayelsa. The fieldwork was conducted intermittently between April 2013 and March 2015 and it included source tracing and mapping in various other Nigerian cities including Lagos, Ibadan and Okada.

The first section contextualises the politics of oil extraction in the Niger Delta and the place of youth in it. The second section briefly discusses what it means to gain respect and manhood and highlights the struggles of youth to find meaning through these concepts. The third section provides a broader discussion about the role of respectability in the mobilisation strategies of Delta youth cults and gangs. The fourth section moves on to discuss contingency as a tool of social mobilisation.

2. Youth, oil extraction and politics in the Niger Delta

Analysing the long duree of global energy history, Michael Watts (2003: 5089) makes the point that 'the annals of oil are an uninterrupted chronicle of naked aggression, genocide and the violent law of the corporate frontier'. While this damning assessment may not reflect the reality of states like Norway who seem to have largely escaped the resource curse (Belkina & Sarkova 2014), it is borne out in many

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ways in the oil rich but volatile Niger Delta region of Nigeria. Far from being a resource for development, oil appears to have become a violent force that has blighted the environment, society and politics of the region, as well as Nigeria more broadly (Obi, 2009; Iwilade, 2012).

In the time between the Mining Regulation (Oil) Ordinance of Southern Nigeria enacted in 1907, the Colonial Minerals Ordinance No 17 of 1914, and the launching of the Presidential Amnesty Programme in 2009, the Niger Delta became both a source of hope as well as a symbol of much of what is wrong with the rentier postcolony. This paradox highlights the complexity of a region whose constant upheavals signal the failures of the state in attending to the needs and aspirations of the most vulnerable social groups residing within its borders. The region has experienced the worst that the political economy of oil has to offer: from the paradox of wealth and poverty (Imobighe, 2011), to that of a shared sense of deprivation resulting in often violent inter- and intra-ethnic tensions (Welch, 1995; Nwajaku, 2005) and of the difference between state and community conceptions of security (Ibeanu, 2002). Watts (2010: 61) notes that Nigerian oil-fuelled capitalism features a:

double-movement...on the one hand a centralizing force, that rendered the state more visible (and globalized), and...financially underwrote, a process of secular nationalism and state building. On the other, centralized oil revenues flowing into weak institutions and a charged, volatile federal system produced...corrupt and flabby oil-led development that was to...discredit the state.

These contradictory impacts of oil in the Niger Delta underline not just the complexity of the resource (or indeed natural resources extraction more generally) as a driver of development, but also the specific ways in which postcolonial institutions can shape or be shaped by the flow of a globally relevant commodity.

Perhaps no social group has responded politically and socially to these contradictions in the Niger Delta in the way its youth have. Youth have confronted the state in spite of being faced with a social landscape that is immensely constraining and repressive. They have done this by exploiting the huge opportunities for innovative self expression that exists within the Delta's informal spaces. On the one hand, they violently challenge state authority and attempt to renegotiate the very meanings of citizenship. On the other hand, however, they collaborate with many of its levers of power (including the armed forces) to subvert the same formal structures and rules that seek to repress them, and against which they often struggle. As a consequence, they are often able to establish alternative forms of governance, or at least embed themselves within the lucrative systems of patronage around which the oil industry turns.

The category of youth is itself a primary site through which contestations for access to the revenue from oil extraction are fought out. For one, those who get to define themselves as youth are able to appropriate a lucrative identity that is actively feted by both the state and oil multinationals. This has become even more relevant in the years since 2009 when the government's official Disarmament Demobilisation and Reintegration project (the Presidential Amnesty Programme) was launched. This programme focused on providing pay offs to violent youth, thus enhancing their status as champions of the beleaguered Niger Delta (Abazie-Humphrey, 2014; Obi, 2014) and intensifying the struggle to acquire the status of militant youth (Nwajaku-Dahou, 2012).

The government's focus on violent youth militia for its Amnesty project shifted the politics of respectability within the militias in profound ways. For one, it created conditions which made the temporalities of ageing an important part of how respectability is conceptualized and used as a tool of mobilisation by youth. As the next section will show, the Amnesty devalued active violence, at the same time that it rewarded those who could lay claim to historical violence. At a particular disadvantage were those youth who, even though they could claim to have been historically violent (that is having participated in militancy), had not attained financial independence and thus, social

maturity. For this group, age is a liability and circulating the post Amnesty landscape meant navigating changing meanings of respectability.

3. Being *Alaowei*¹ and being youth

Among the Ijaw people of Ekeremor in the oil state of Bayelsa, it is said that the main goal of a man in life is to become *alaowei*. The word *alaowei* is derived from *ala* ('king') and *owei* (man). Taking together, *alaowei* refers to an advanced state of manhood in which a man becomes a man of respect and means. To become *alaowei*, a male must first become *kemeowei*, that is 'be a man'. *Kemeowei* is derived from the words *keme* (human) and *owei* (male). The etymology of the words indicates a linkage between gaining respect, being a man and being human. The implication is that one's very humanity is in doubt until one can claim the status of *kemeowei* and that to qualify for social status, one must become not just a man but a man of mean..

The notion of who qualifies as *alaowei* reflects both the social imaginary of a people who look to a largely sanitised past in which basic values of respect and community are supposedly central to social organisation, as well as the demands of a new modernity in which social mobility often demands acts of violence, corruption and exploitation. Combining these two spaces of respectability – the sanitised past and the violent present – brings to mind the distinction that Roitman (2006) makes between illegality and illegitimacy. In her chapter on the ethics of illegality, she argues that even though social actors are often aware of the legality or otherwise of their actions, the fact of illegality does not necessarily make the action illegitimate. Indeed, the pursuit of legitimate but otherwise illegal action is sometimes the source of the moral legitimacy with which actors claim respect. This conception of ethics within illegal social action illustrates the struggle of social groups to reconstruct respectability from the hallowed ruins of a distant value driven past and the realities of a violent materialist present. The past in this context represents the *legitimate* while the present represents the *illegal*. Gaining respect or becoming *kemeowei* thus requires an artful balancing of these two competing worlds, creating constantly shifting notions of respectability.

The balancing process also often requires performing respectability when actually being respectable – or, if one likes, being *alaowei* – is difficult or momentarily impossible. Across various youth contexts, many writers have shown how the performance of respectability can be central to social relationships and mobility. Sasha Newell's account of Ivorian *bluffeurs* for instance, offers useful comparative insights into the dynamics of respect and shows how such activities can make sense within what he called a "cosmology of social practice" that extract meaning from local contexts and rethinks "connections between mimesis (the magic of the copy) and the postcolonial relationship to modernity" (Newell 2012: 3). In this regard, youth appropriate and perform actions that help signal their respectability even when their material circumstances do not quite meet the *alaowei* status. The implication of this is that, even though the material accoutrements of 'modernity' and social respectability are important, they are only socially useful in so far as they can be signalled through what Veblen (1899) called 'conspicuous consumption'. Those who don't actually possess them, can navigate social relationships merely by performing consumption. Friedman (1994) makes the point, in relation to the extravagance of Congo's *Sapeurs*, that consumption is essentially about self-making, self-definition and self-maintenance, rather than a rationalist mode of economic accumulation. By linking consumption to self-making, Friedman's work illustrates the innovative ways in which youth inhabit social spaces by profoundly questioning dominant modernities at the same time that they seek to express it.

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