

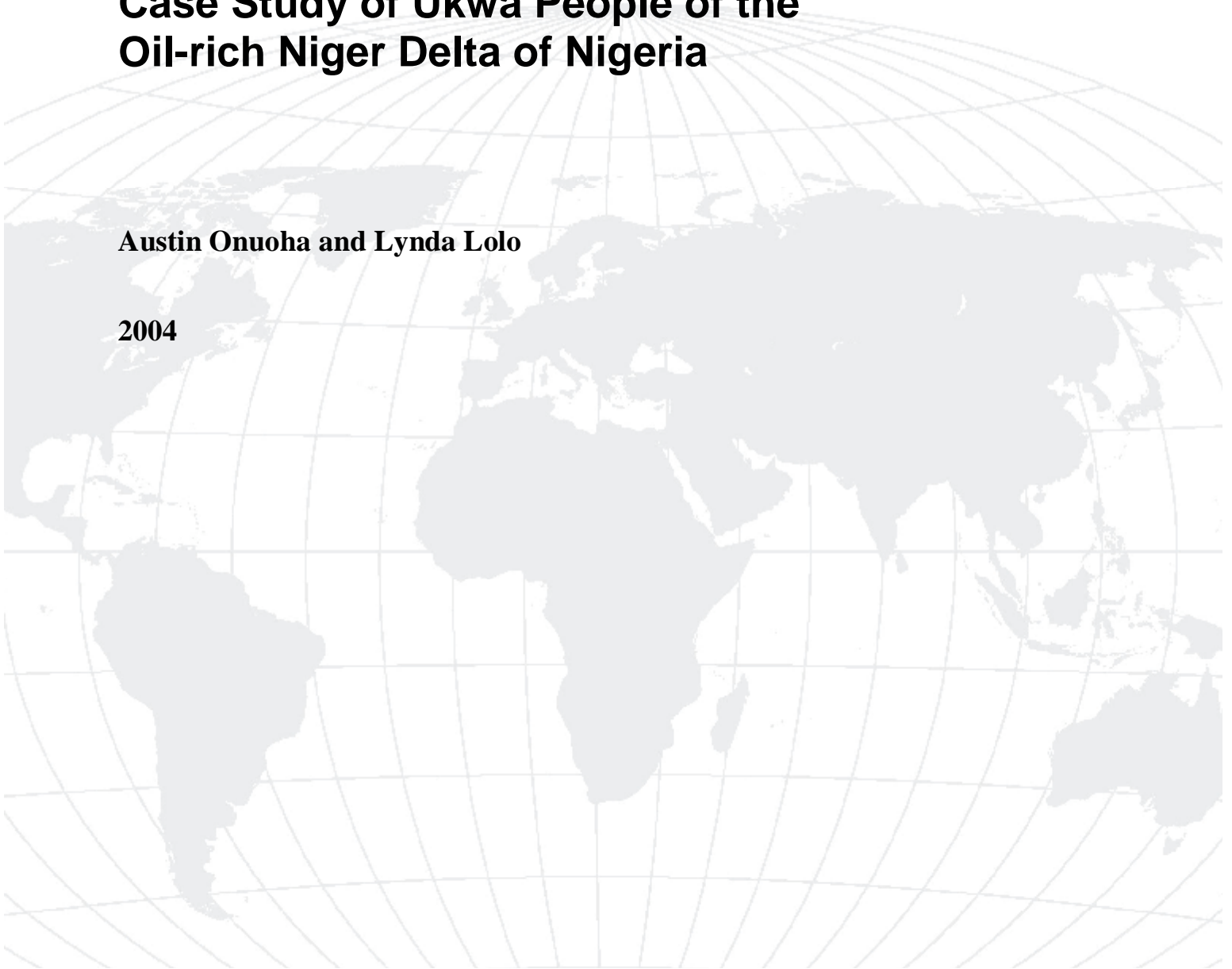
STEPS TOWARD CONFLICT PREVENTION PROJECT

Case Study

Case Study of Ukwa People of the Oil-rich Niger Delta of Nigeria

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2004



This document was developed as part of a collaborative learning project directed by CDA. It is part of a collection of documents that should be considered initial and partial findings of the project. These documents are written to allow for the identification of cross-cutting issues and themes across a range of situations. Each case represents the views and perspectives of a variety of people at the time when it was written.

These documents do not represent a final product of the project. While these documents may be cited, they remain working documents of a collaborative learning effort. Broad generalizations about the project's findings cannot be made from a single case.

CDA would like to acknowledge the generosity of the individuals and agencies involved in donating their time, experience and insights for these reports, and for their willingness to share their experiences.

Not all the documents written for any project have been made public. When people in the area where a report has been done have asked us to protect their anonymity and security, in deference to them and communities involved, we keep those documents private.

Note Of Appreciation

Being nominated to carry out this case study for a group as reputable as the ***Collaborative for Development Action (CDA)*** is a real privilege. I started this project with an MA and ended it as a Doctoral Candidate in Conflict Analysis and Resolution. This project provided me with the opportunity to look at things from a different and unique angle. This is the angle of what has worked or is working. David Cooperider calls it “Appreciative Inquiry”.

First, I like to express my profound gratitude to my colleague and friend Lynda Lolo who agreed to work with me on this project at short notice. To Chris Omenyi who did all the camera work, I am grateful. And to my number one guide, Charles Akara, thank you. I am also deeply grateful to CDA staff that met me for the first time and thought that I have something worthwhile to offer. To Kristin and Luc I say thank you.

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Introduction

The area is known as Ukwa while the people are called Asa and Ndoki respectively. They speak a dialectal variation of the Igbo language. The story of the origin¹ of the Igbos is not very clear. The Ukwa people especially the Ndoki claim Igbani origin. By this they mean that they may have migrated from the Atlantic area. This claim of a riverine origin gives them an air of difference (nay superiority) from the regular Igbos especially in their attitude to life. This issue of origin will come to the fore again when they try to explain the reasons for not participating in violence. They are located in Ukwa East and Ukwa West Local Government Areas in the present day Abia State in the south eastern part of Nigeria. The Ngwa people are their neighbors in the east while the Ikwerres border them in the west. The Opobos are in the southern part. They all belong to the riverine area of Nigeria. They are the people of the Niger Delta.

The Niger Delta is about 70,000 square kilometres. It is one of the largest wetlands in the world. The area is made up of three main ecological zones namely: the sandy coastal area, the fresh water swamps and the dry forest land areas. There are more than 20 different ethnic groups in the region. The Ijaw is reputed to be the fourth largest ethnic group in Nigeria and the largest in the Niger Delta area.

The Niger Delta of Nigeria is made up of nine states namely: Abia, Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo, Imo, Rivers and Ondo. Total oil reserve in the area is estimated at 30 billion barrels. Nigeria is reputed to have earned a whopping \$340 billion in the last 40 years from the black gold. Petroleum accounts for 83% of Nigeria government earnings, about 95% of export earnings and 40% of GDP².

According to the 1991 census figures, the Ukwa area is home to about one hundred thousand people. It has about 23 villages. Oil was found in the Niger Delta (Oloibiri to be precise) in 1956. In the Ukwa area, it was not until 1962 that the Oil Well at Umuorie was opened. That at Owaza in 1984 and Umunkalu and Umuokwor followed in quick succession. At Akwete there is no exploration going on currently. According to one local government official we interviewed, "they have capped the oil-wells here; production will start sometime in future".

One major argument has been whether the conflicts in the Niger Delta fit the profile of the conflicts to be studied in the STEPS³ project. Some of the arguments are that the area is small so the conflict is insignificant. Second, the whole of Nigeria is not involved. Third, that the conflicts in the area is largely economic not social or political. Critics also claim that the area is not strategic or does not belong to the core Niger Delta because they produce very little quantity of crude. In an interview, the traditional ruler of Umuorie Eze Innocent Nkwocha told us that the oil company operating in his community produces about 5000 barrels of crude daily from the oil well there. When we went over to Shell installation to confirm this, the staff on duty told us that they are barred from speaking to the public. And Umuorie is just one of

¹ For a detailed discussion on the origin of the Igbos see Isichei, E. A History of the Igbo People. London: Macmillan Press, 1976. See also Afigbo, A. Ropes of Sand: Studies in Igbo History and Culture. Nsukka: University of Nigeria Press, 1981.

² Catholic Relief Services. Bottom of the Barrel: Africa's Oil Boom and the Poor. June 2003, page 26.

³ This drew a prolonged debate during CDA consultation when these case studies were handed out in June 2003 at Boston, USA.

the villages out of the 23 in the area and the population of Umuorie is about 6000. However, the significance of the place is underscored by the fact that the *President of the Senate of the Federal Republic of Nigeria* is from the area. Second, the commissioner representing Abia state in the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC)⁴ is also from the area.

Oil is the main issue in Nigerian politics⁵. The Nigerian civil war 1967-70, was fought and won around the issue of who controls the oil. Hear Sarah Ahmad Khan “the renunciation of the (Aburi) agreement was related mainly to the issue of oil revenue distribution. The fear that the Eastern Region would, in fact, benefit greatly from partial autonomy and therefore greater control over its substantial oil wealth gave momentum to the degeneration of affairs into civil war”⁶. The entire Niger Delta population which is about 10 million is bigger than many countries in Africa. To be specific, the Ukwa area which was selected for this case study is about 100,000 people. An area that produces more than 95% of total government earnings cannot be said to be insignificant. If the Niger Delta sneezes, the entire Nigeria catches cold. Moreover, no region has drawn attention to Nigeria more than the Niger Delta. Apart from the religious conflicts in the northern part of Nigeria no area is as conflicted as the Niger Delta. “Conflict patterns in the South-South zone of Nigeria could be considered a microcosm (a reproduction and condensation) of larger conflict developments in the Nigerian social system”⁷. Moreover, the Niger Delta harbors the largest number of expatriates in Nigeria. Nigeria is seen through the lenses of what is happening in the Niger Delta. Nigeria’s influence and relevance in the international arena is anchored around the Niger Delta.

As we write this an oil company staff who prefers anonymity says that the US plans to source for 40% of her oil needs from Nigeria within the next two years. According to *African Analysis* of January 11, 2002 “the US has been paying increasing attention to African energy resources since the 11 September, 2001 terrorist attacks. Three American think-tanks will hold seminars in the next two months to examine an aspect of the US-Africa energy relationship”. With this growing importance the Niger Delta should and must attract the attention of discerning conflict resolution practitioners and peace scholars. This is because the conflict in the area is not only perennial but is fast becoming intractable⁸. “The oil producing communities in the Niger Delta, while often remote, isolated and inaccessible, are nevertheless inextricably linked to the international community through the production and sale of oil”⁹.

Another argument posited is that the Ukwa area has not had much problems with the oil companies. At Umuorie we saw evidence of acid rain from gas flares on the roofs of people’s houses. At Ohanso, the people had a problem with CGG (an oil

⁴ NDDC is a government parastatal that has the responsibility of developing the Niger Delta.

⁵ See for instance Okadigbo, Chuba. *Power and Leadership in Nigeria*. Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishers, 1987, pp. 92-104.

⁶ Quoted by Okonta and Douglas in *Where Vultures Feast*, p.22

⁷ Institute for Peace and Conflict Resolution: *Strategic Conflict Assessment: Consolidated and Zonal Reports (Nigeria)*. March 200, p.181.

⁸ In the second week of August 2003, the oil city of Warri erupted in violence that allegedly claimed more than 100 lives. See *Sunday Punch*, August 24, 2003 pp. 38-40.

⁹ Michael Fleshman of the Africa Fund based in New York addressing a conference on the crises in the Niger Delta at Ogun State Nigeria (Sept. 20-23, 1999). The Conference was organised by CDHR and sponsored by Ford Foundation.

contracting firm) this was resolved by the council of elders. Ukwa area is home to the gas line that leads to the Iron Smelting Company at Ikot Abasi. On the day that the project was tested “we lost many of our old people because they have never had that kind of noise in their entire life before”.¹⁰

The good news however is that in the midst of this madness some areas decided to keep the peace. One of such groups is the Asa and Ndoki people. Collectively the area they inhabit is known as Ukwa. This report is about them. This report is aimed at finding out why they chose the path of peace as their own response to the crisis in their area. This report will list, analyse and reflect on some of the possible explanations for their non-participation in violence. The main objective will be to see whether there are broad patterns that one could use as lessons for peacebuilding. There are many aspects and dimensions to conflict prevention. This project examines just an aspect. Effective and prompt conflict resolution methodologies is also another. Attacking the systemic issues that breed violent conflict is also another aspect.

Methodology

The research on which this report is based was conducted over a period of two months (July to August 2003). The research methodology was mainly qualitative not quantitative. On the whole we interviewed about thirty people formally. We chatted with many others informally. But we made sure that our interviewees cut across different segments of Ukwa society. We interviewed men and women, youths, politicians, religious leaders, ordinary people and the high and mighty. We made sure that whoever we interviewed was from Ukwa. However, we interviewed some oil company staff who refused to be named and the main reason they gave for the non-participation of Ukwa people in the violence that have engulfed the Niger Delta is the success of their community development programs. Evidence on ground is to the contrary. According to the Bishop of Ukwa, Anglican Communion, “there is no relationship at all between the oil companies and the community”. This is not to suggest that the oil companies have done nothing. This is far from the fact. The point is that the conflicts in the area have been attributed to poor community relations policy. Second is that most of the oil companies do not have a conflict resolution desk or department. What they have is community development or sustainable development units. The lack of recognition of the existence of conflicts in the area could also be said to account for this problem.

The interviews lasted between 10 and 30 minutes on the average. The interviews were recorded on tape and some on video. The interviews took long because the respondents took the first five minutes or more to lament their woes in the hands of the oil producing companies. So we had to listen and gradually weave them back to the theme of the project- which is the non-participation of communities in violence conflicts.

The questions were not structured. However, they were framed in such a way as to avoid a yes or no answer. Second, we asked the same question several times and in different wordings, in order to get as an in depth response as possible. For instance the question went like this “why do you think that your people are not fighting the oil

¹⁰ Interview with Chief G.I.Akara.

companies like other areas in the Niger Delta?” Then we will reframe the same question to “what strategies do your people use to get what they want from the oil companies?” For the elders and the traditional rulers we added this rider “how have you succeeded in persuading your youths and women from not participating in violence against the oil companies?” And for the women we asked “how have you prevented your men and children from participating in violence against the oil companies?”

There were follow-up questions based on the responses we got. For instance one respondent said “Ukwa people are peaceful by nature”. We followed up with “can you explain what you mean or can you say more about that? So in analysing we had to listen to the tapes over and over again to “hear what they were not telling us”. The interviews were not transcribed because of the limitation of time.

Most of the interviews were conducted in English language but a few were in Igbo language. But generally the people spoke “Englignbo” a combination of Igbo and smattering English. So we do not think that there is a problem of translation. We interviewed the literate and not-so literate. Each respondent was interviewed separately and in a different location except for the leadership of the women association who we interviewed jointly. Regrettably we missed two key people that we would have interviewed and we believe could have enriched the study the more. They are the President of the Senate of the Federal Republic of Nigeria and the Chair Caretaker Transition Committee of Ukwa East Local Government.

During the interviews we were four in our party. Apart from the two of us, we hired a local guide and a camera man. Though my colleague is from the area, my insistence on another guide was informed by my experience in other areas of the Niger Delta where it is not advisable to enter without a local. Our fears proved unfounded since the place was peaceful. Some of the interview appointments were scheduled while some were walk-ins. Most people were interviewed in their homes, while some were interviewed during public gatherings like the reception held for the Senate president.

The main challenge of carrying out this research is that it is almost impossible to conduct these interviews without comparing one Niger Delta community with the other. And since the focus is on those that are not participating in violence, how does one craft the interview questions in such a way as not to seem as if one is demonising the other communities. Second, this is especially for me who has been involved deeply in the Niger Delta, how does one conduct this research without passing on the message that “you people have been docile”.

We did overcome all these by detaching ourselves, our views and our experiences from the process. Second, my colleague being a non-activist and a government employee was like a soothing balm. My training at the Conflict Transformation Program of the Eastern Mennonite University also came in handy. We quoted our respondents as accurate as can be since the interviews are on tape. The interpretations, conclusions and reflections are entirely ours. However, they are based on the data from the interviews.

This report will be in eight sections. The first section will be the introduction which will give an overview of the location of the Niger Delta and how the report is

organised. Section two will give an insight into how the oil industry in Nigeria is organised. The reason for this is that the structure of the oil industry and its complex and technical nature has been responsible for several uprisings¹¹ in the Niger Delta. Section three will discuss the nature, causes and sources of conflicts in the Niger Delta. This will help us to understand why those who decided to exempt themselves chose that course. For instance we will be able to find out to what extent these causes and sources are prevalent in the Ukwa area. This section will also examine the various kinds of conflicts in the Niger Delta. Section four will discuss the various responses to the conflict in the Niger Delta. This will help us to put into perspective the response of Ukwa people. Section five pulls together the results of the interview to explain why Ukwa people say they are not participating in the violence. Section six will examine what Ukwa people did not tell us in the interviews. Section seven will be the conclusions while eight will be our reflections on the project.

The guiding principle in preparing this report is brevity. We have tried to keep to this. But because we are writing for an international audience that may not be familiar with the details and nuances of conflicts in the Niger Delta, we have tried to background the report in such a way that a first time reader will grasp the issues as quickly as possible.

This report is not perfect; it was not intended to be. Within the limits of available time and resources we have tried to capture as much as we can. Much still remains to be done. There are still other communities in the Niger Delta that have decided not to participate in violent conflicts. It will also be worthwhile sometime in future to study them. It will also be worthwhile to devote sometime to study the indigenous conflict resolution methodology of Ukwa people.

During the period of this research, many of our interviewees kept asking us whether we are going to draw the attention of government and the oil companies to their plight. We made no commitments but we told them that the report will be made available for all to see. Another question was why we are conducting this research. One youth asked whether we are journalists, others wanted to know whether we are working for the oil companies, while others cautioned that they will like to see the outcome of this research change the attitude of government and the oil companies towards the development of Ukwa. We made no commitments. We do sincerely hope that our explanation that we are simply researchers carrying out a case study for a group was understood. We do hope that the outcome of this will bring something good to Ukwa people. What these questions and comments from our respondents tell us is that there is conflict in the Ukwa area. The people cannot be said to be totally satisfied. But why did they choose the course of not “fighting for their right”? That is the meat of this report.

The Structure of the Oil Industry

In Nigeria, the Federal government controls the oil industry through the Nigeria National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC). The NNPC came into being in 1977. Its progenitor was the Nigeria National Oil Corporation which was founded in 1971 in

¹¹ For details of some of these uprisings see Okonta, Ike and Oronto Douglas. *Where Vultures Feast*. San Francisco, California: Sierra Club Books, 2002.

compliance with OPEC Resolution number XVI. 90 of 1968. This resolution has directed members to “acquire 51% of foreign equity interests and to participate actively in all aspects of oil production”.¹² With this resolution, the people of the Niger Delta had thought that they will have a say in how their land is exploited. This was not to be. This heralded the beginning of the agitation in the Niger Delta today.

The NNPC has many subsidiaries. It is involved in both upstream and downstream operations. These include exploration, production, refining, pipelines and storage terminals, marketing of oil, gas and refined products and petrochemicals. The government appoints major personnel in the NNPC structure. The NNPC runs what is known as joint venture operations with other multinational corporations in Nigeria. These multinationals include Shell, AGIP, ELF, Chevron, Mobil and Texaco. Over the years the NNPC has continued to reduce its stake in the operations of the oil companies. For instance it has lowered its stake in Shell Petroleum Development Company (SPDC) from 80% to 55%. The reason for this may not be unconnected with its inability to meet up with its financial obligations under the joint venture agreements.

The license to participate in any kind of activity in the oil industry is granted by the Federal government of Nigeria. The Oil Minerals Act of 1969 invests in the Federal Government absolute control of all minerals including oil within the territory of Nigeria. This includes both onshore and offshore. The clincher is the Land Use Act of 1978 which invested the ownership of all lands in Nigeria in the State Governments. “Prior to this decree, land was communally owned and the various traditional rulers, clan heads, and community leaders had the power to determine customary law insofar as this affected land tenure and use”¹³. The Land Use Act made the indigenous people of Ukwia tenants in their own homeland to an institution that they neither recognise nor relate to.

The implications of the above are many. First, the oil companies have no legal obligations whatsoever towards their local host communities. Second, the host communities have no say absolutely in how and what happens to the oil revenue. Third most of these legislations were enacted under military regimes, so its import was not lost on the people of the Niger Delta. The 1969 legislation was to break the backbone of Biafra during the civil war of 1967-70 while the 1978 law was meant to whittle down the influence of traditional rulers. “No where else in Nigeria has the impact of the Land Use Decree manifested, in all its imperfections and inequities, as in the Niger Delta region, Nigeria’s main oil producing region.”¹⁴

However, the most important implication of the existence of the NNPC is that it is a big bureaucracy, corrupt and inefficient. Unfortunately, the oil companies cannot undertake any development project without approval from the Department of Petroleum Resources (DPR) of the NNPC. According to an oil company staff “it takes the DPR an average of twelve months to approve one borehole project and before they

¹² See Okonta, I and Oronto Douglas. *Where Vultures Feast*. San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 2001, p.55.

¹³ Okonta, Ike and Oronto Douglas. *Where Vultures Feast*. San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 2001, p.26

¹⁴ See Constitutional Rights Project (CRP). *Land, Oil and Human Rights in Nigeria’s Delta Region*. Lagos: CRP, 1999, p.3.

do, the budget has gone up by almost 50%”. The point is that the oil industry in Nigeria, which is synonymous with the NNPC is highly politicised. It is not run for profit but for political patronage.

Oil is also no longer a mere local resource. The price, production and distribution of oil are tied to the international system. According to Michael Fleshman of the New York-based Africa Fund, “the oil producing communities in the Niger Delta, while often remote, isolated and inaccessible, are nevertheless inextricably linked to the international community through the production and sale of oil”. So the host communities watch as things happen to them and they have neither say nor control over issues around the oil industry. We shall see how this has impacted the dynamics of conflict in the area.

Under these joint venture agreements the oil companies pay royalties, rent and tax to the federal government. After this they do not feel obligated to commit to any further finances in their host communities. But because of the absence of government presence in these communities, the oil companies are now playing a surrogate role or alternative government. Michael Fleshman has this to say “over time the companies have often become the effective local governments in the areas in which they operate”. They complain that this is increasing the cost of doing business, while the communities claim that it is their right to enjoy the benefits of God’s gift to them. This is at the core of the conflict in the Niger Delta. A recurring question among the people of the Niger Delta is who owns the land? Second, who bears the bulk of the impact of oil exploration activities? Is the government responsive and responsible enough to use the resources of an area to develop that area?

Nature, Causes and Sources of Conflict in the Niger Delta

During the course of this research we identified eight different kinds of conflict in the Niger Delta. These conflicts are neither special nor unique to the Niger Delta. However, the intensity and dynamics of the conflicts have been affected both by the presence of and the politics of oil. Our interest in identifying these conflicts is to find out whether these conflicts are non-existent in the Ukwa area. If they exist, how did they manage them in a non-violent manner, if they do not exist, why?

The people of the Niger Delta are mainly farmers and fishermen. Oil on the other hand is explored both on land and from the sea. With these two activities competing, land will be in short supply. Like most rural communities whose life is tied to the land, there are many land disputes in the Niger Delta. These land disputes could be between families, villages, ethnic groups and even with oil companies. One of the most prominent land disputes in the Niger Delta is between the Eleme and Okrika in Rivers State. The Ijaw, Urhobo and Itsekiri crisis in the Warri area is also linked to land¹⁵.

The cause of this land dispute is not far fetched. Being in the riverine area with a growing population and urbanisation, land was definitely going to be in short supply.

¹⁵ See Conflict and Instability in the Niger Delta: The Warri Case. Imobighe, T.A. et al. Ibadan: Spectrum Books, 2002.

This was to be complicated by the influx of oil company workers and their contractors. Conflicts about land are escalated by the presence of oil on such lands¹⁶.

More importantly, land has a symbolic significance for the people of the Niger Delta. Land is not just a resource to be exploited. Land is bequeathed from generation to generation. They bury their dead on the land. They even worship the earth goddess. When settling disputes people bare their feet and have direct contact with land as a symbol of honesty. They bury the umbilical cord of new born babies in the land as a mark of identity. They have a psychological attachment to the land. Today, in the Niger Delta this sacred resource has been desecrated. Land has been demystified and rendered ordinary. According to the people, the abominations being experienced today may not be unconnected with the desecration of the land. The commercialisation of land is something that the people are finding difficult to come to terms with. For instance a recurrent question is how can you sell land?

Another type of dispute that has become very prominent in the Niger Delta is chieftaincy tussle. Apart from the three main tiers of government in Nigeria, namely local, state and federal, some form of recognition is accorded the traditional institution. Since after the local government reform of 1976, the traditional institution has acquired some form of relevance at the grassroots level. It was in recognition of this fact that the Land Use Act of 1978 was promulgated.

The traditional institution in some places is hereditary while in some others it is rotatory. So succession disputes are very prevalent. A good example is the unfolding drama in Kula Kingdom in Rivers State. The dispute becomes intense if the community produces oil. This is because the traditional ruler shall be in a position to interface with the oil companies for such patronages as contracts, jobs and other financial payoffs.

There is also the leadership tussle in the communities over who leads the local development association. The issue here also is about “positioning for visibility”. In the Niger Delta there is a proliferation of associations. These associations are meant to represent several interests within the communities. Whoever leads these associations also has access to several privileges. The tussle for the leadership of these organisations is as intense as the competition for any other political position. The “divide and rule” tactics of government and some oil companies also intensifies these conflicts. These conflicts can be as violent and deadly as any other. We shall discuss these associations more in depth in the section on why the Ukwa people decided to exempt themselves from the violence around them.

There is also the conflict between elders and youths. This centers around who represents the community. The argument by the youths is, that the elders have not represented them well, or that they have sold out or are too conciliatory. In turn the elders accuse the youths of impetuosity. This eventually divides the community and in the process, violence may erupt. Pastor Ayo Oritsejafor, founder of *Word of Life Bible Church* and a mediator in the Warri crisis captured this elder/youth divide thus: “but it is sad that youths in the area no longer listen to their elders. In fact they are the

¹⁶ For a detailed discussion on this Lateral Pressure Theory of the causes of violence see C.Choucri and Robert C.North. Nations in Conflict. San Francisco: W.H. Freeman, 1975.

ones who now tell their elders what to do. It is a very serious situation”¹⁷. This is also fuelled by resources being channelled to one group against the other.

A very prominent conflict in the Niger Delta is that around oil spill. From time to time oil spills from pipelines or flow stations. This spill causes extensive damage to land and rivers. According to oil industry regulations, compensations are paid if the spill is as a result of equipment failure. But if it is as a result of sabotage no compensation is paid. First there is the conflict between the oil companies and the communities over whether the spill is as a result of equipment failure or sabotage. Second is who gets what compensation. Third, how much should be paid as compensation. Fourth if the spill is on the river, it might affect non-oil producing communities. Fifth who gets the contract for the clean up.

There are other conflicts around where to cite specific community development projects, how to quantify the effect and impact of noise and other damages caused by oil exploration activities. All the above conflicts are felt more at the community level.

However, there are other conflicts that do not directly impact the day to day life of the communities. They include the issue of resource control, on/offshore oil dichotomy, boundary disputes over the location of oil installations, revenue allocation and dispute between the entire Niger Delta and the Federal Government of Nigeria.

A major source of conflict that was identified by the people of the Niger Delta is that of disrespect¹⁸ or the non-acknowledgement of their right over their land. Oronto Douglas identifies “contempt and lack of respect” in the attitude of oil company staff as a major source of conflict. This condescending attitude of oil company staff has led to a lot of violence. Government has reinforced this through the Land Use Act and by aligning with the oil companies against the people. This is bad because “a policy based on reaction to a problem, rather than on insight into it, only too easily makes a difficult situation worse”¹⁹. This has led to the criminalisation of entire community. For instance, Odi, Umuechem and Ogoni have tasted this very bitter treatment. The paradox is that some of these oil company staffs are indigenes of the Niger Delta.

How have Ukwa people responded to these conflicts within their own area? Do these conflicts exist in the Ukwa area? These are some of the issues that we shall address soon.

Responses to conflicts in the Niger Delta

A question that readily comes to mind is what is the relevance of the responses to non-participation in violence? These responses could be violent or non-violent. And it is this that constitutes participation and non-participation. By responses here we mean how the various parties engaged those they perceived to be responsible for what was happening to them. And in the Niger Delta area, there have been a lot of misplaced aggression and “scape-goating”. We shall come back to this later.

¹⁷ See Sunday Punch, August 24, 2003 Vol. 20, No. 1169, p.40

¹⁸ For an in depth discussion on the relationship between respect and violence see Gilligan, J.

¹⁹ See Udo, R.K. Land Use Policy and Land Ownership in Nigeria. Lagos: Ebiakwa Ventures, 1990, p.5

There are about four main parties to the conflicts in the Niger Delta. First is the government. They are the local, state and federal governments. Second are the oil companies. Third are the host communities. Four is the international community. There are other fringe or peripheral parties but the above are the major ones.

Whenever conflicts erupt in the Niger Delta, the government sees it either as crime, a break-down of law and order or a disguised opposition to government. And their response has been to suppress the conflict, prosecute offenders and restore law and order. This can be seen in the trial and subsequent execution of Ken Saro Wiwa and eight others in November 1995. There was also the Odi massacre of November 1999 ostensibly in the pursuit of some “hoodlums”. There was also the sacking of Umuechem in 1990²⁰. Peter Ozo Eson of the Center for Advanced Social Science (CASS) in Port Harcourt summarised it thus: “The state response to the unrest has been to brutally put down protests rather than engaging the communities in meaningful dialogue”.²¹

The responses of oil companies have been a mixed bag. They see the conflicts as violations of the law. That is why they are always quick to invite law enforcement agents. They have also undertaken several development projects. For instance, in Ukwa area, Shell has built a five-room block for the local school. They also tarred the road that leads into Umuorie. At other times they have also responded through “silence, denial, defiance, co-optation and payment of money to selected community leaders”.²²

For the oil producing communities, they have been overwhelmed by the “hunch-back that visited their community”. Their responses have been varied over time. First, in the early seventies when the economy was buoyant, much attention was not paid to the activities of the oil companies by the communities. Again the pipelines and oil installations were also fairly new and durable. Corruption and inflation were also at manageable proportions. But suddenly in the late seventies the economy nosedived, oil installations and equipment began to age. Corruption and inflation reached the double-digit mark.

Communities first asked for dialogue, the oil companies and military dictatorship read sabotage in the demand. The communities barricaded the access to oil company installations, they took oil company workers hostage, they protested, they even sabotaged oil company installations. According to Jiti Ogunye, “the Delta is on the boil. Youths are taking over rigs, flow stations and installations everyday. Intercommunal cleavages are threatening to submerge the region. The flare of the resources generated from crude oil by the military junta has heated up our social, economic and political environment to an unbearable degree...”²³.

²⁰ For details of some of these see Human Rights Watch. *The Price of Oil: Corporate Responsibility and Human Rights Violations in Nigeria's Oil producing Communities*. New York: HRW, 1999.

²¹ Committee for the Defence of Human Rights (CDHR). *Boiling Point: The Crises in the Oil producing Communities in Nigeria*. Lagos: CDHR, 2000, p.51.

²² Committee for the Defence of Human Rights (CDHR). *Boiling Point: The Crises in the Oil Producing Communities in Nigeria*. Lagos: CDHR, 2000, p.159.

²³ Quoted by Festus Iyayi in *Boiling Point*. P.152

What informed this varied response from the communities? According to Oronto Douglas, deputy director of *Environmental Rights Action (ERA)* and co-author of *Where Vultures Feast* “all the protests, demonstrations, shut-downs, hostage-takings are attempts to state our case”²⁴. How then have the people of Ukwa “stated their case” without resorting to the above strategies? Is it that the oil companies listened to them? Or is it that they have not had the same kind of problem being experienced in other Niger Delta communities? Or are they simply satisfied with their lot? Or do they feel utterly powerless against the rampaging resources at the disposal of the government and the oil companies? We shall come to that soon.

The response of the international community has been based mainly on the mandate and interest of such organizations and governments. Governments that are interested in buying Nigeria’s oil want peace in the area for continuous production. International NGOs that are involved in human rights work are interested in human rights violations. Those in conflict resolution, peacebuilding and development have been sponsoring workshops, conferences, channelling development aid and other resources to the area.²⁵

A crucial question that is very relevant to this project is how have the people of Ukwa responded to these conflicts? “We wrote letters, we held discussions, we dialogued, we made representations and at times the council of chiefs led delegations”²⁶.

What were the major motivations that made Ukwa people choose a different course of action? What informed their preference for a non-violent response? Was it a deliberate conscious choice or was it happenstance? What is their perception of the choice they have made? To what extent can these choices be sustained? What institutional mechanisms exist within Ukwa culture that helped to nurture and sustain these choices? Are they even aware of the choices they have made and why they made those choices? How do other communities in the Niger Delta perceive the Ukwa response? And how do Ukwa people see the response of other communities in the Niger Delta?

²⁴ Interview with Oronto Douglas, September 29, 2002, for another project on the Niger Delta.

²⁵ For in depth discussion on this see such reports as *Boiling Point* by CDHR, *Conflict and Instability in the Niger Delta: The Warri Case* by Academic Associates PeaceWorks etc.

²⁶ Interview with Eze Innocent Nkwocha.

Why Ukwa people are not participating in the violence

(i) *Leadership*

The concept of leadership among Ukwa people is as complicated as the nature of the people. Every interviewee alludes to a leader. But who is the leader? There is no definite answer. Every Ukwa man or woman is a leader of sorts. This unique concept of leadership is at the root of their non-participation in violence but also in the organisation of their community. They have their traditional rulers. They also have their elders. There are also the women and the youths. It is also a paradox that leadership accounts for participation in violence and also for non-participation. “The inescapable fact is that the decision to use violence is made by leaders to incite susceptible groups”²⁷.

The youths say that “if the youths are allowed they will do it”²⁸ (that is participating in violence). The bishop says “my people are naturally peaceful, that is stepping into the steps of their grandfathers, and they believe that violence cannot be the answer to any problem”²⁹. A male youth that works with a bank in Aba “the traditional rulers we have, they have not failed us”,³⁰ Mrs Lily Kanu a women leader says “if we want to protest our husband and sons will not allow us”. The traditional ruler of Umuorie Eze Innocent Nkwocha says “it is not in our blood to be violent; we have our forefathers they did not bear us with such blood”.

From the above responses it is obvious that the respondents have a higher authority they are all referring to. There is an implicit recognition of the role of leadership. In some other communities, the leadership has lost credibility but among Ukwa people “they have not failed us”. The Bishop explains that in some other Niger Delta communities the elders have had a long-standing relationship with the oil companies and for the youths “they have had it”. But in Ukwa area, because of their collective leadership, there is very little room for suspicion. So one of the reasons why Ukwa people have decided to exempt themselves from the violence around them is that each group acts as a check on the other. The women check the men, the men check the youths and the elders check the community. And this is working because the leadership is a credible and trusted one. The only way one can describe the concept of leadership among Ukwa people is that it is “cyclical”. In other words, the present is deeply rooted in the past. And this past is a trusted, credible and collective past.

The key word here is “trusted leadership”. The Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary defines trust as “the belief or willingness to believe that one can rely on the goodness, strength, ability etc. of somebody/something”. It also means to “treat somebody/something as reliable”. For a leadership to be trusted, that leadership must have emerged through a transparent process. This also confers it with legitimacy. The leadership is not ad hoc. It is not emergency leadership. It was not thrown up by an

²⁷ Carnegie Commission on Preventing Deadly Conflict. Preventing Deadly Conflict: Final Report. Washington, DC: Carnegie Commission on Preventing Deadly Conflict, 1997, p.xiv

²⁸ Interview with Eunice Lolo an unemployed mass communication graduate from Obahu Asa in Ukwa West Local Government Area.

²⁹ Interview with His Lordship, Bishop Uju Obinya, Diocese of Ukwa, Anglican Communion.

³⁰ Interview with Charles Akara, a youth and banker from Akwete in Ukwa East Local Government Area.

emerging social phenomenon. The leadership has matured over time. Because of these attributes the leadership is considered reliable. It is this kind of leadership which derives its power and authority from its legitimacy that has the capacity to dissuade a community from participating in violence. It is a durable leadership that sustains itself from the collective will of the people.

In history leaders (read demagogues) have used participation in violence to legitimise their claim to leadership. “Mass violence results when leaders see it as the only way to achieve their political objectives, and they are able to mobilise groups to carry out their strategy. Without determined leaders, groups may riot but they do not start systematic, sustained campaigns of violence to achieve their goals; and without mobilised groups, leaders are unable to organize a fight”³¹. This same kind of leadership is more often than not sustained under a crisis situation. There is no where this has played out more than in the Niger Delta. This has led to a proliferation of associations. It is also responsible for the dizzying propaganda that has kept the Niger Delta on the boil. The situation is complicated by the patronage accorded these splinter groups by governments and oil companies. In Ukwa area this has not been the case.

Why then is it that in spite of all the assaults by massive urbanisation, population explosion and breakdown of the social fabric of most societies, Ukwa people have remained closely knit together. Chief G.I. Akara explains: “leadership here evolves. You do not just wake up and become a leader. We have a strong and long-standing age grade system which acts as leadership training for us. In this age grade system, values, norms, aspirations, yearnings, standards and conventions that prevail in Ukwa land is passed on from generation to generation. In this age grade system, no matter how rich you are, if you are a stubborn somebody your mates will tell you to your face”. Chief Don Ubani, Constituency *Liaison Officer* to the Senate President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria says “self and collective discipline has always been our business”.

The hierarchy of Ukwa society recognise the moderating role of each as contributing to peace in their community; this has resulted in trusted leadership which evolved over the years through such institutions as the age grade system and the family. Is this unique to Ukwa people? How is it different in other communities? Apart from their relationship with the oil companies, how have Ukwa people responded to other violent situations like election violence, the Nigeria civil war and other social uprisings within the Nigerian nation? The conflicts earlier identified in the Niger Delta do they exist in Ukwa area? If they do how have they responded? If they do not, why?

(ii) Socialization versus Mobilization

Before the 1990s the Niger Delta was not as charged as it is today. Though there have been skirmishes here and there. For instance, the people of the Niger Delta have had to contend with the Europeans over the slave trade. With the introduction of the so-called legitimate trade (trade in palm oil and kernel), they also have to contend with

³¹ See Carnegie Commission Final Report, p.30

the Europeans who never wanted them as equal trading partners³². In 1966, Isaac Adaka Boro a youth from the Niger Delta and 40 others proclaimed the Niger Delta Peoples Republic.³³ This was brutally put down. There have been wars and conflicts but they have not been perennial and intractable. But in the late eighties the tide was to turn as a prolific writer joined in the Niger Delta fray.

Ken Saro Wiwa is an indigene of the Niger Delta. He is an Ogoni. A very proud people with a very proud heritage. Oil was found in Ogoni about 40 years ago. Ogoni is a community of about 500,000 people. Ken (as he is fondly called) founded the very successful *Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP)*. According to Karl Maier “the campaign against the government and Royal/Dutch Shell for a greater share of oil wealth, political autonomy, and an environmental cleanup drew worldwide attention and helped spark what has effectively become a low-level guerrilla war throughout the Niger River Delta”.³⁴ Ken Saro Wiwa’s campaign was to change the face of the conflict in the Niger Delta.

As a writer of popular literature and producer of the very popular television comedy “*Basi and Company*”, Ken was very popular. He was also financially comfortable. All these he brought to bear on his campaign. Ken was unambiguous about his campaign. The oil companies were the issue and he blamed them for all the ills of the Niger Delta. How does all these relate to the Ukwa people non-participation in the conflict? A major cause and source of violent conflict is propaganda. Activists prefer to call it mobilization. This campaign did not rub off on Ukwa people because it was circumscribed. The Ogoni in the name MOSOP must have made it an ethnic affair that was restricted to Ogoniland for instance. Could Ukwa people have accepted the Ken type of leadership and mobilisation? The answer is obvious.

One of the main reasons why Ukwa people are not participating in violence is because they have not been “mobilised” for it. There is no intense demonisation of the oil companies. The Ukwa people are not bemoaning how they could have been millionaires if they were allowed to control their oil. Chief Don Ubani says “we are very law-abiding, we are not given to crisis, and we are not given to violence”. Chief Akara concurs “we are easily satisfied with what we have”. In other parts of the Niger Delta, where two or three are gathered the issue is the oil companies. We did not notice this among Ukwa people. They saw government more as the culprit and not the oil companies. Charles Akara one of our respondents underscores this issue thus “it is a political issue generally; we see the oil in our land as God’s gift”. And when the Bishop was asked what they have done to get what they want from the oil companies he replied “may be this will better be handled by those of them in politics”.

A visit³⁵ to some other parts of the Niger Delta will illustrate this point more. In 2001, this present writer was part of a visitation team to the Niger Delta. Others in the team included people from the Ecumenical Council for Corporate Responsibility (ECCR),

³² For a detailed discussion and historical perspective of commercial activities in the Niger Delta see Okonta, I. and Oronto Douglas. *Where Vultures Feast*. San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 2001. See also Ikime, O. *The Fall of Nigeria: The British Conquest*. London: Heinemann Books, 1982.

³³ CDHR. *Boiling Point*. Lagos: CDHR, 2000, p.3

³⁴ Maier, K. *This House Has Fallen: Nigeria in Crisis*. London: Penguin Books, 2000, p. 76.

³⁵ The report of this visit is entitled *When the Pressure Drops*. It is published by ECCR in 2001. The report was written by Barbara Hayes who is the chair of the council.

Trocaire of Ireland, Catholic Relief Services (CRS), Human Rights Commission (HRC), Center for Social and Corporate Responsibility (CSCR). Whenever we entered any community there was intense struggle among the people to convince us of where to go, who to visit and who not to visit. I was shocked when a teenager openly told us not to visit a particular person describing him as a vulture. We heard such metaphors as “hawks” and “sell-outs”. In another community a teenager barricaded our way unless we paid him toll. So the entire life there revolved around oil and the oil companies. In one of the communities, one young man described the ELF installation in the area as an “alternative local government”. Lending credence to this Michael Fleshman wrote: “over time the companies have often become the effective local governments in the areas in which they operate”.³⁶

As we wrote at the beginning of this report, it was almost impossible to enter any of these communities without a guide. This was not the case in the Ukwa area. And the reason we found responsible for this is that they have not been mobilised for this. Rather they have been socialised as Mrs Kanu said “we are peaceful people right from the word go”. In the section on conclusion and reflection we shall say more about this whole idea of “mobilisation and socialisation” and how they can encourage or discourage participation in violent conflicts.

Closely related to the above is the issue of the proliferation of associations. For the purposes of this report let us call it factionalisation. The struggle among these groups to represent the community has led to a lot of conflicts. It has also bred leadership tussle. So we do not only have conflicts between them and the oil companies but intra-communal conflicts as well. Among the Ukwa people we found three associations namely *Asa Improvement Union (AIU)* and the *Ndoki Development Union (NDU)*. There was also the *Ndoki Solidarity Forum (NSF)*. None of these associations was established primarily for the purpose of interfacing with the oil companies. According to one respondent, “they have existed even before the advent of oil in Ukwa land”. Another respondent told us that “we don’t have any unions that flex muscle with the traditional council”. Another said that “the unions as a platform symbolise the collective image of our people, and once we stay on this platform and talk it is a collective response to collective discipline”.

The question is why are the people of Ukwa not factionalised? Why is there no proliferation of associations in the area? To what extent can we say that the non-proliferation of associations have been responsible for their non-participation in violent conflicts? The answer to the above could be found in the fact that conflicts can be very intense or escalated where local and external actors are competing for influence. Because the Ukwa area is not factionalised, it has not been opened up for all sorts of adventurers.

More importantly in a study entitled *Civil Society, Oil and Conflict in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria: ramifications of civil society for a regional resource struggle* Professor Augustine Ikelegbe found that “civil society has flowered, taken over and escalated the struggle and constructed itself into a solid formation of regional resistance. Civil groups have reconstructed the agitation into a broad,

³⁶ Michael Fleshman addressing the same conference referred to earlier.

participatory, highly mobilised and coordinated struggle and re-directed it into a struggle for self-determination, equity and civil and environmental rights”.³⁷

The point has been made that proliferation of groups enhances propaganda which in turn escalates conflicts and leads to mass participation in violence by communities. Because there is no proliferation of groups among Ukwa people, this has led to almost nil propaganda (read mobilisation) and therefore non-participation in violence. However, the challenge here is, is there anything within the Ukwa community that makes them resistant to proliferation and propaganda? Second, if there is a proliferation of associations and the accompanying propaganda, are there mechanisms within Ukwa community that will moderate the impact of this and constrain them from participating in violence?

Another possible explanation which we found out as to why Ukwa people are not participating in violence is the presence of an alternative means of livelihood. Let us elaborate on this more because it is also related to the issue of proliferation of associations and propaganda. Ukwa area is sandwiched between two commercial centers namely Port Harcourt (PH) and Aba. PH claims to be the oil capital of Nigeria. The economy of PH is formal, technical and sophisticated. To make an inroad into PH one has to be highly skilled. Moreover it is a very expensive city to live in.

On the other hand Aba is informal with lots of cottage industries and artisans. Aba is about 20 minutes drive from Ukwa area, PH is about one hour away. As soon as youths grow up in Ukwa area with little or no education they move to Aba to chase their dreams. Here they can learn a trade, acquire some skills and generally begin life. In PH it is very difficult for a beginner. And like we noted earlier, the oil industry which is the mainstay of PH economy is not an all-comers affair.

The implication of this as one female respondent explained is that “the fighters are gone”. She explained that youths do not remain in the village to foment trouble. Because of the opportunities provided by Aba they are all too eager to leave home and seek their fortune in Aba. This is not the same with PH. PH is not welcoming to beginners. So many youths in other parts of the Niger Delta remain at home and become the foot soldiers for all sorts of violent conflicts. In fact many earn their living by participating in violent conflicts.

In contrast the youths in Ukwa area are not available to be used. Because they are not available their participation in violent conflict becomes almost impossible. In fact among Ukwa people any young man who remains in the village is seen as a never-do-well. It would be recalled that the above is not a modern day phenomenon. Aba has a history of being the commercial nerve center of eastern Nigeria even in pre-colonial times. The attractiveness of Aba pre-dates the advent of oil.

Second, Ukwa area is reputed for weaving the legendary “Akwete Cloth”. This is a skill that keeps the people busy and earns income for especially women in the area. Participation in violence may disrupt this age-long tradition of weaving. Akwete weaving is both an art and science that requires so much concentration, energy and

³⁷ Journal of Modern African Studies, 39, 3 (2001), pp. 437-469

creativity. People involved in such creative enterprise may not be too willing to engage in violence. On the face of it this argument may seem pedestrian but a deeper analysis will reveal its soundness. First, human nature abhors change especially from known to the unknown. Second, the uncertainty associated with engaging in violence is a zero sum game. Third, and more importantly, Akwete weaving is not just an economic means of livelihood but a culture, an identity and a way of life. Such treasure of inestimable value is not easily given away for violence.

It is valid to argue that in some other parts of the Niger Delta, there is also the rural urban migration. Second, the women have also participated in violent uprisings. So it is not only the youths that participate in violence. So even if the youths are gone, there are still the women. To what extent the presence of Aba has mitigated their involvement in violent conflicts we may never know for sure. But one thing stands very clear, during our visits to Ukwa area at no point in time were we confronted with this large army of youths that we have been used to in the other Niger Delta communities. Second, the persistent attempt by youths in these other areas to extort money from visitors was totally absent. In fact we sought out most of the youths we interviewed. And in none of the meetings we had with the elders and women did the youths show up. The absence of youths hanging around the community in one way or the other must provide a credible explanation for their non-participation in violent conflicts.

If conflicts are at times based on resources why then did the youths of Ukwa ignore the resource in their own back yard? Is it that they do not care or that they are not aware of the potentials of the oil industry or is it just that of resignation? Or are they simply put conflict avoiders? We may never know their motivation but suffice to mention that whatever their reason is, it has worked for the interest of peace. For how long and how sustainable this could be we may never know.

Closely related to the above is the culture of infant apprenticeship which is prevalent among Ukwa people. This is a system where an infant between the ages of seven and ten is made to go and live and serve a relation in one of the urban areas (in this case Aba). During this period the infant also learns a trade. At the end of his/her service period, the mentor or master gives him/her some initial capital to start his/her own business. During this period, the infant does not only learn a trade but also how to respect elders and be responsible.

(iii) Psycho-cultural factors

There is no conclusive scientific proof so far that there is something in the psychological make-up of human beings that makes them more violent or peaceful than the other. However, there is evidence that ones disposition towards violent or peaceful resolution of conflicts could be influenced by the socialisation process. There is also evidence that there are certain cultural elements within communities that could predispose more towards a peaceful response to conflict situations.

Bishop Obinya says that “my people are naturally peaceful”. Eunice Lolo agrees that they are not fighting “because they are peaceful”. Eze Nkwocha says that “we are very peaceful”. No one ever lays claim to being violent. Even when they have

perpetrated violence, the alibi is either provocation or self-defence. So what is new when the people of Ukwa say that they are naturally peaceful?

Chief Akara tries to explain their peaceful disposition when he says that “the Ndoki man is easily satisfied with what he has”. Chief Ubani says that “it is our natural disposition to be hospitable”. Many of our respondents made reference to their nature of being self-contented with whatever they have. If we unpack this with the theory of scarce resources as one of the causes of conflict, then it begins to make sense why the Ukwa people are not participating in violent conflicts. If they are easily satisfied with what they have, then no matter how scarce a resource is they will be ready to share.

Apart from the above, the idea of the Ukwa person being hospitable could also account for their non-participation in violent conflicts. Chief Akara says that “the guest in his house gets the best”. Chief Ubani also talks of their being hospitable. If the culture of the Ukwa people is such that welcomes strangers and gives him “the best”, it stands to reason that since the oil company people are strangers they may be entitled to the best treatment. And that includes having a peaceful relationship with them. The question is how has these values been carried from generation to generation. Chief Akara says that it is from the long-standing age-grade system. So this “collective discipline” is a basic innate strategy of responding to conflict situations.

There is something fatalistic about the worldview of the Ukwa person. Hear Chief Ubani “by the time you explore and exploit our people, after a very long time the truth will come, even where you decide to be devilish in your relationship with us, one day you will realise that you so cheated this people that even nature itself will turn against you and you will realise that the best you can do is that from he who you exploit, you will also have to plough back”. This appeal to the divine is a thread that runs through the worldview of Ukwa people. Because of this reliance on divine intervention, they do not deem it worthy to fight the battle for their God. Embedded in this philosophy is the idea that whatever will be will be. Moreover, this resonates with the Christian doctrine that “the blessings of the Lord, it maketh rich, and he addeth no sorrow with it”³⁸. Chief Ubani concurs with “we are believing God, that God’s time is the best”.

Lady Victoria Obinya *President of Mother’s Union and Women’s Guild* told us that there is no guarantee that after fighting that you will get what you fought for. She said that they may destroy the little they have, lose their children and maybe the money will not come. Fear of the unknown drives people to leave their destinies in the hand of the divine. This probably explains the reason why Ukwa people are very reluctant to engage in violent conflicts.

What has been the staying power of these traditional values and institutions against the rampaging onslaught of modernisation? Our respondents say that “we seem to be satisfied in whatever little things we have”. Lady Obinya told us that Christianity came to the area early³⁹ because of its location on the coast. And because their traditional values and institutions found a meeting ground with Christian teachings they were able to reinforce each other.

³⁸ Proverbs 10:22 (King James Version).

³⁹ Christianity was said to have come into the area in the 1800s For a detailed discussion See Isichei, E. A history of the Igbo People. London: Macmillan Press, 1976, pp. 160-184

Moreover, Lady Obinya says that while other areas have been mobilising their people on how to fight the oil companies, they have been sensitising their people on how to be peaceful since that is what their faith teaches them. The point here is not that they have avoided violence simply because they are Christian, but that they have made a deliberate and conscious effort to inculcate in their people the value of being peace-loving and using the Christian faith as a framework for this socialisation process. It made sense to them because it reinforces the values they had inherited from their culture.

Many of our respondents mention education as a restraining factor. This is instructive because when we pressed them for their most important need they also mentioned education. When we pressed one of them to explain to us how education has made them not to participate in violence, he said “the Ukwa man is enlightened”. His explanation was that because of early contact with Europeans that they are able to decide for themselves the course of action they could take. On the face of it, this reason is persuasive but not convincing. But a closer look will reveal the meaning of what they are saying. And this must be interpreted within the context of their culture and everyday life.

The Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary defines enlighten as “to give somebody greater knowledge or understanding”. The Ukwa people had an early contact with the Europeans. They participated in the slave trade not only as traders but also as victims. They also were involved in “legitimate trade”. They had an early contact with Christianity and western education. For a long time they have had contact with different kinds of people. Could it be that this cumulative experience (greater knowledge and understanding) must have informed them that “discretion is a better part of valor”? Is their non-participation in violence conflicts informed by experience that violence does not pay as many of our interviewees opined? And in comparison to their neighbors who are participating in violence can we say that they are better enlightened?

A key factor which we identified as having insulated Ukwa people from violence is the absence of demagogues. Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary defines demagogue as “a political leader who tries to win people’s support by using arguments which are emotional and often not reasonable”. We did not come across any among Ukwa people. No reference was made to any that existed in the past. Ukwa people to the best of our understanding (at least based on this project) have no folk heroes or heroines. We were not informed of any. What is it in Ukwa culture that constrained the rise of demagogues? Chiefs Akara and Ubani say it is “collective leadership”. Leadership is such that it does not allow the visibility of one person.

Second, Ukwa people according to Chief Akara people are enlightened. Demagogues take advantage of the fear and susceptibilities of a people to lead them into violence. We must understand this enlightenment within their social context. A community that has diffused power centers and an age grade system that nurtures youth may never give rise to the ascendancy of a demagogue.

Third, Ukwa society is obviously hierarchical. Like a typical Igbo community, there are chiefs, elders, titled men and women and youths. But the community is such that

one cannot take advantage of a title or age to lord it over others. The title and age is supposed to moderate people more into being consensus-builders instead of lone rangers. This also makes for clear demarcation of roles in the community. For instance, people never talked of things that are not within their turf in the community. A respondent, when asked about the role of Asa Improvement Union referred us to her father, the Bishop referred us to politicians and another youth referred us to the elders' council. May be no one person will take it upon himself or herself to lead people into violence without proper consultation. That is probably the reason why a respondent said "believe me if we decide to be violent, we will be worse than the other areas". The operative words here are "we and decide". The collectivism rings true all the way.

Another possible reason why Ukwa people may not have participated in violence is the empowerment of various segments of the population. For instance, Ukwa like most typical rural communities is patriarchal. But the women knew their area of authority. They for instance never allowed their children to participate in violence. Though they spoke of their husbands not allowing them to participate in violence, the men also referred to their women as discouraging them. The Bishop summed up this when he said "our strength is in our women". Chief Akara sums it up like this "you'll agree with me that if you want to know the spiritual level of a family, find out the spiritual level of the woman. By extension, if you want to know the spiritual level of a people, find out the spiritual level of their women. Our women are peace-loving". We also saw a lot of well-educated women who were playing key roles in the society, For instance my colleague who worked on this project with me has a Masters degree in public administration and she works for the government and she is from Ukwa. Bishop's wife is widely travelled and very articulate. The chair of Ukwa East Local Government is a woman. There were so many others. This calibre of people cannot be led by the nose into violence.

What Ukwa people did not tell us

Nigeria is a multiethnic society. The Ukwa people are a "minority within a minority". Among the Igbos (the third largest ethnic group in Nigeria) the Ukwa people are a minority. Among the people of the Niger Delta, Ukwa people are a minority. A major determinant of conflict dynamics is power. In this case, and within the context of Nigeria and the Niger Delta, the people could be said to be powerless. Do they have the resources to withstand the government and the oil companies? However, one looks at it, their choice to remain non-violent is also an indication of power.

Among the Ukwa there is an identity crisis. Chief Akara captures this thus: "the Ndoki man has a riverine origin, he is an Igbani man taking his origin from the Atlantic, and he is not an Igbo man per se". If the Ukwa person is not Igbo and not core Niger Delta, who is he? Is it possible that this identity conflict, which is intrapersonal, has so overwhelmed the Ukwa person that s/he is so weary to fully engage other issues? Elizabeth Isichei tried to answer this in her book cited earlier. She had argued that many of the people who occupied the present day Ukwa area were Igbo slaves who were on their way to Europe and was brought back by the wave of the abolitionist movement. She cited the example of Jaja of Opobo, who is originally from Nkwerre and was sold into slavery and ended up in Opobo. If this is correct, can one then say that the non-participation of Ukwa people in violence is a

kind of resentment or withdrawal syndrome to protest the treatment meted out to them by their kith and kin. Or could it be said that they do not feel a strong attachment to the land because they are immigrants? Chief Akara disagrees “we migrated across the Imo River and settled, though with intermarriage with our Igbo brothers of the hinterland a lot has changed”. Professor A.E.Afigbo disagrees⁴⁰.

Between 1960 and 2003 the Ukwa community has moved from Eastern Region to East Central State, to Imo State and to Abia State. Seventeen villages in Ukwa area were initially contested between Imo and Rivers State. Eventually it was passed to Imo, and then Abia. As we write, the boundaries are yet to be clearly delineated. May be Ukwa people are waiting to resolve their identity crisis before confronting the oil companies.

Going by the history of the oil industry in Nigeria, oil company activities in Ukwa area is a fairly recent phenomenon. The implication of this is that the equipments are fairly new, so the level of equipment failure experienced in other communities may not exist in Ukwa area yet. This means that the level of devastation being experienced in Ukwa area might not be significant enough to unleash the kind of reaction we are getting from elsewhere. Another thing which they did not tell us is that they are surrounded by neighbors who may likely take advantage of any uprising to feather their own nests. So their strategy of non-violence might be a way of keeping off adventurers. Ukwa area was very strategic during the slave trade era. Even when legitimate trade was introduced, they also played a crucial role. It is not unlikely that the devastating experience of the slave trade has made the people violence-weary. For one who is conversant with Ukwa area and the politics of Nigeria, one important point that is not very obvious is that for almost every government that have ruled Nigeria, Ukwa people have been strategically positioned to play a role. Whether this is a deliberate effort by the people to maintain a political relevance or an attempt by Nigerian political establishment to appease the people because of their natural resources we may never know. But what we know is that their presence in government has in one way or the other put them in a position where they consider themselves different. To what extent they have used this strategic political positioning to develop their area is another issue. But comparatively Ukwa area cannot be said to be totally underdeveloped.

Conclusion

The fact according to our investigation is that there is conflict in the Ukwa area between the community and the oil companies. These conflicts are as a result of failed promises or expectations from both the oil companies and governments. Oil production is still going on in the area. No oil company staff has been held hostage at least as at the time we conducted our investigation. There have been no protests and demonstrations. The reason for this is that individuals, communities and groups respond to conflicts in different ways. Several factors inform the selection of a particular kind of response. For the people of Ukwa their choice was informed by the basic human need of survival. And one of their responses has been avoidance. This is neither good nor bad but it has served them the purpose of preserving their area, their

⁴⁰ See his *Ropes of Sand* for his views on the origin of the Igbos.

identity, their culture and their people. Could this very strategy have worked for other people and under different circumstances we may never know?

What we do know however, is that their non-violent disposition is a strategic response informed by a survivalist instinct. Our investigation informs us that there is no one single explanation for communities or individuals not to participate in violent conflicts. Just as there is no one single explanation for participation. There are many possible reasons for non-participation. These reasons are not mutually exclusive but mutually reinforcing. The challenge for peacebuilders is to identify several of these factors that account for non-participation across board and see how they could be applied to prevent participation in violent conflicts.

Another possible conclusion is also that participation in violence is not a spontaneous response. It is premeditated over time consciously or unconsciously by sustained propaganda. This propaganda is ditched out by those struggling for leadership. This propaganda is aimed at a critical element that is at the heart of a people's existence. This could be their identity, their source of livelihood or the mere manipulation of a fear factor. People jump on the violence train and see these propagandists as their saviours. Participation in the violence becomes for them a source of legitimising their claim to leadership. Ukwa people for one reason or the other has been insulated from all these. But most other Niger Delta communities have experienced the dynamics described above.

Another big lesson from the Ukwa experience is that conflict prevention is a collective endeavour. No one person or group of individuals can prevent a people from participating in violence. But a single individual can manipulate a whole population into participating in violence. Violence prevention is like building a house, many different people are involved and it takes time and concerted effort. On the other hand participation in violence is like destroying a building; one person can do it in a very short time. Our research showed that at every level of Ukwa society everyone was involved in one way or the other in ensuring that violence does not consume the entire community. The consensus built around this issue is so infectious that one cannot help but notice. For instance, on one of the days we were conducting the interviews, the people were holding a reception for their son President of the Nigerian Senate. There have been grumbings that a section of the community (where the Senate President comes from) have hijacked the event instead of carrying the whole of Ukwa people along. This complaint was muted. The reception went on as planned and everyone participated. If it were in other Niger Delta communities we were used to the event would have been disrupted by violence or protest. The uninformed would not have noticed the muted anger. That is the nature of Ukwa people.

In another instance, a young man who was learning a trade has died in circumstances that the community considered unwholesome. When his corpse was brought home a handful of youths have tried to protest the manner of his death. But the elders quickly calmed the situation and the burial ceremony went on as was planned. In other Niger Delta communities, a riot would probably have broken out and several dangerous weapons would have been used. In the process oil companies would have been affected in one way or the other. The ability of Ukwa people to quickly and easily

reach a consensus on several burning issues is not only remarkable but worthy of a more detailed inquiry.

Reflections

In conducting the interviews, our respondents consistently used such phrases as “we are not like that at” or “we do not behave that way” or to use a popular Nigerian parlance “it is not in our character”. Reflecting on this a few things come to the mind. First, they know and believe that violence is bad. Second, they are comparing themselves with those who are participating in violence. So they are different from this other people. Not just different but better. We did not find out what their neighbors thought of their non-participation but we know that they will deride them.

If non-participation in violence is being different, what are the motivating factors? What makes one think that the course of being different is the best? What are the costs of being different? How can one sustain this difference?

Non-participation in violence is a deliberate choice. It is also a risky choice especially in the midst of consuming violence. People who participate in violence plead that “we have no choice”. Ukwa people showed that they do not only have a choice but that they have different choices. They made the choice which to them suited their aims and goals. To what extent this choice was informed by altruism or selfish interest we may never know. But it has served the community well.

Another recurring theme is “we are naturally peaceful”, “we are peaceful by nature”, “we are peaceful right from the word go”, “it is our natural disposition to be hospitable”, “traditionally the Ukwa man is a peace-loving somebody” and so many others. We are aware for instance that no one will claim to be violent. But taking so much pride in being peaceful is also an issue worthy of deeper thought especially in an environment where violence has almost become a way of life. The use of such words as “natural” and “traditional” conveys the impression that their non-participation is innate. In fact one respondent said “the basic strategy is innate, it is in-born”. A respondent said “we are not competitive, acquisitive and hostile like our neighbours”.

If it is in-born does it mean that in all situations that the Ukwa person will tow a non-violent line? What was their role for instance during the Nigerian civil war or the other social uprisings? We may never know even if they did oppose it because these involved the whole nation and their opposition would not have been noticeable. Another issue is that it is only recently that peace and conflict resolution scholars began to take interest in the whole issue of “oasis of peace”. This is because for too long humanity has been involved in seeing the worst in us. But now we are beginning to be “appreciative in our inquiry”.

Like we said at the beginning, it is difficult to conduct this research without comparing your sample population with others. This came out clearly because each respondent never said a word without referring to their neighbors. They saw their neighbors who are participating in violence as being “ill-informed”. They do not even begrudge them because according to them they have not seen any benefits derived from participation in violence. The issue then is do their neighbors realise that they

have not benefited from participating in violence? Are they prepared to do a rethink of their strategy? Who will bell the cat for them since anyone who opposes violence is seen as a saboteur.

We came across several metaphors in the process of conducting this inquiry. Respondents used such words as “mafias”, “ruffians”, “troublemakers” etc. to refer to their compatriots who are participating in violence. Their neighbors refer to those who are participating in violence as “liberators”, “freedom fighters”, “patriots” etc. One could hear them saying that “we are fighting for our right”. What this tells us is that Ukwa people see violence as bad. The issue is where did this come from? Is it innate or as a result of experience or a mere happenstance or a survival strategy? The impression we got from our inquiry is that it is a community norm. It is passed on from generation to generation and it has been sustained by a succession of trusted leadership.

We also noticed the very high degree of consensus in Ukwa community. Out of the more than thirty people we interviewed not one said that they were participating in violence. No one condemned the other. No one said anything different from the other. For instance they all said that they are “naturally peaceful”. No one tried to nominate interviewees for us. No one pushed any agenda through us. It is an organic community that is smooth in its flow and clear in its direction. How were they able to achieve this kind of consensus among themselves? Is it cultural or experiential? We could not find out since the people did not even celebrate it.

While we were preparing for this research, my colleague has said that “we have no culture”. She is from Ukwa area. As we continued with the work I constantly reflected on what she meant. This was to fall in place when one respondent told us “we are not Igbos per se but of Igbani origin”. This respondent was trying to emphasise their attitude of being self-content with whatever they have. And it was in muted reference to the core Igbos who are stereotyped as being “too acquisitive, hostile and competitive” in nature. Another innocuous incident happened when we were trying to interview a group of women. These three women are married to Ukwa men but they are originally from Owerri. They were now discussing among themselves whether to grant the interview in Owerri dialect or Ukwa. We found this very interesting and related it to my colleague’s earlier comment that they had no culture. If Ukwa people had Igbani origin, settled in Igbo land, married women from different areas had Opobo people working and living with them and Ngwa and Ikwerre people as neighbors, what then is their culture? Could it be said then that it is this exposure to different cultures that has made them develop a unique way of building consensus and managing conflict without resorting to violence?

Another issue is how residents of Ukwa area easily get sucked in their non-participation in violent conflicts. The women who were married from outside have bought into it. The laborers have also been assimilated into the same philosophy. Our thinking is that Ukwa people do not just mouth peace they live it that explains why every visitor or guest easily gets caught in the web.

One surprise for us was that throughout the interviews, none of our respondents used the word non-violence to describe their response to conflicts in the area. They constantly used “peaceful nature” or “traditionally peaceful”. Does it mean that the

word does not exist in their vocabulary? Our thinking is that non-violence is an artificial philosophy that is foreign to the people. Their description of their responses is indigenous. It is taken from their day to day existence. And to Ukwa people being peaceful is normal natural way of living. That is why they do not celebrate it. At times they are even hardly aware that it is something worth studying.

One of the issues that always arise with this kind of inquiry is what could be the likely unintended consequences of this project. We are aware that this kind of project has not been carried out in Ukwa land before. What is it going to tell them? What will be their reaction to this project? The issue is if they attracted attention from researchers for being peaceful, will they attract development in the same way also?