TERRITORIALIZATION OF HISTORY AND THE HISTORICIZATION OF SPACE: ETHNIC RELATIONS AND THE HISTORY OF IJAW PETRO-MILITANCY IN WARRI, WESTERN NIGER DELTA, NIGERIA

Elias COURSON (PhD)¹

Abstract

The article interrogates how ethnic groups' unequal access to, and/or non-participation in the global capitalist economy in the sixteenth to mid-twentieth century (pre-colonial and pre-oil era) created unequal power relations among ethnic groups in Warri. The paper argues that conflicts in Warri are embedded in questions on autochthony (first settler), politics of place, belonging, identity and contested citizenship. In addition, conflicts arising from autochthonous claims and counter-claims by these groups on the ownership of Warri are compounded by an ethno-politically motivated change in chieftaincy nomenclature and demands for political citizenship. The contemporary conflict (popularly called oil-conflict) in Warri is layered on, and cannot be appropriately explained outside the pre-oil and colonial-era conflicts in the Region. The discovery and exploration of Oil in Warri and environs reconfigured pre-oil crises and created new forms of conflicts through varied and complex processes of primitive accumulation and dispossession. Methodologically, it draws on primary and secondary data sources and makes extensive use of archival materials to elicit the historical and contemporary dimensions of the conflicts, while using the resource curse narrative as a theoretical framework.

Key words: Petro-militancy, Autochthony, Territory and petro-politics, Oil Curse, Niger Delta

¹Elias Courson lecturer at Department of Philosophy, Niger Delta University, Bayelsa State, Nigeria. Email: coursonelias@gmail.com
Introduction

Warri, an important city established by Colonial officers in the nineteenth century is the most populated and significant oil city in Delta State (though not the capital). Escravos Port, an outpost in riverside Warri serviced western slave and palm oil merchants, and the hinterlands in the eighteenth and nineteenth century. Today, Warri is the epicenter of oil activities in Western Niger Delta, second only to Port Harcourt as Nigeria's petrol-hub. Warri is host to one of Nigeria's four refineries, an oil terminal, a petroleum depot, and a seaport. In Warri, these economic development initiatives are matched by recurring ethnic clashes and violent conflicts, which have earned the city a place on the global map of violence.

Little is known about the history of Warri and the relationship that existed between the various ethnic groups inhabiting the city and environs before the advent of Portuguese traders into the territory in the fifteenth century. But the fundamental problem in regard to Warri is contentions surrounding which of the oral traditions of origin posited by the major ethnic groups (Ijaw, Itsekiri and Urhobo) is universal truth. Central to the story is who the first settlers were, who the autochthonous communities are and what their territorial jurisdiction is. In Nigeria, politics as well as historical narratives are greatly influenced by ethnicity and ethnic rivalries (Falola & Aderinto, 2010). Radically different historical accounts among the three ethnic groups, based on equally divergent histories of origin, speak to the knotty question of who actually settled first in Warri. Since every group claim to be the autochthon, with histories and

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2 Asaba, the hometown of Maryam Babangida (the then President’s wife during its creation), was announced as the headquarters and remains so to this date. Warri continues to take center stage in the state. The population of Warri in the 2006 census was put at over 500,000. Warri is made up of both coastal and inland settlements and it is a multiethnic cosmopolitan city comprising the Itsekiri, Ijaw, Urhobo, Kwale, Isoko and Igbo. Warri is host to the western headquarters and operations of most oil corporations in the Niger Delta such as: Shell, Chevron, Texaco, ENI-AGIP, etc. A gigantic Liquefied Natural Gas project underway by the American oil giant Chevron is near completion in the Escravos Rivers of Delta State. Warri refinery serves the western fringe of Nigeria.
documents fabricated and (re)constructed to sustain such claim, how do we determine who amongst the Ijaw, Itsekiri and Urhobo is indigenous and who is an immigrant to Warri? This, Warri's historical trilemma, has defied solutions and generated tension and strife in the Western Delta.

The Oil-Curse Thesis and Conflicts in Warri

The Oil-curse is an influential body of knowledge and practice which has circulated widely and is now rooted in wide-ranging debates over the relations between neoliberal globalization, security and development (The World Bank, 2011). It is a theoretical narrative that links security, conflict and development. Oil dependent states are turbulent and volatile and tend to be associated with civil and/or violent conflicts. Economists have postulated greed as the motivating predatory factor that propels conflict in oil-endowed states. The causal linkages between Oil and conflict are premised on predation or rebellion as organized crime theory of oil violence. Scholars focus on the significant question of funding violence politics and offers an argument that Oil provides grounds on which rebels can finance rebellions (through looting of oil resources) that are self-interested and criminal movements against the state (Berdal & Malone, 1998; Collier & Hoeffler, 1999; Collier et al, 2003; Collier, 2007; Jua, 2007; Reno, 1993). Scholars like Ross (2003), Addison et al (2003, 365-386) have linked the outbreak and/or prolongation of conflict in nations of the global south to abundant resource endowment, which feeds into corruption, struggles over resources and political instability (Brunnschweller & Bulte, 2008; Dibua, 2005; 2004; Forest & Sousa, 2006; Frynas & Pailo, 2007; Ginifer & Ismail, 2005; Martin & Subramanian, 2003).

Oil revenues are credited to economic stagnation, political instability and social conflicts in oil-rich nations of the world – the paradox of plenty (Cramer, 1998; Gore & Patten, 2003; Yates, 2012). Unfortunately, Nigeria, Indonesia, Equador, Venezuela and Angola
are nations in this class that have followed a similar petro-developmental trajectory. As Karl (1997) rightly asked, 'Why have most oil-exporting developing countries suffered from economic deterioration and political decay? Ikelegbe (2006) argues that foreign mining and mineral exploration corporations enter into alliances with state or non-state actors to have unhindered access to the legitimate or illegitimate commerce in Oil, and attempts to stop such an organized economic syndicate may result in violence. Oyefusi (2007) empirical analysis of conflict in the Delta bifurcates the propensity for violence at the individual and community levels. Oyefusi (2007) attributes an individual's propensity to 'lower income, lower educational attainment, lack of asset or asset-immobility, if an individual is unconstrained by a marital bond, or is from the dominant ethnic group'. In his data analysis, 'oil availability, long distance from state capital and absence of government presence makes a community haven for would-be 'rebels' (Oyefusi, 2007). Collier's work Bottom Billion (2007), uses Oyefusi's survey of Niger Delta communities to strengthen his case, though with some inconsistencies. For example, the data on oil variables consists only of the availability and number of oil wells in a community space but says nothing on their status (producing or non-producing) or the quality and quantity of Oil from the fields or wells. More significantly, Oyefusi's data seems to indicate, contra Collier's account of rebel recruitment and mobilization, that education, income, ethnicity and assets increase the likelihood of personal grievance as basis for rebel participation. Unemployment and political repression or accumulation by dispossession seem to be of no consequence as regards grievance level or rebel participation. All of this makes for, as Ross (2004) has admitted, a much more complex field of causality.

However, Mitchell (2011) and Watts (2007) espouse shortcomings and inadequacies in the literature on oil-curse: oil-conflict linkages. Mitchell (2011) argues that rather than engage in comprehensive social and political analyses of the materiality of Oil, neoliberal narratives are concerned about the revenue therefrom. Watts (2010,
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50-80) similarly, traces how the materiality of Oil (what he calls 'oil complex') produces and reconfigures governable spaces, and the variety of violence it engenders; local authority, inter-ethnic relation, and local state institutions. Instead of seeing predation or state power of coercion and cooption as the concern of oil-dependency, Watts (2010, 50-80) interrogates how the insertion of Oil into 'forms of rule and political authority' produces contradictory forms of governable and ungovernable spaces as well as contrasting forms of identity. The Niger Delta region of Nigeria (especially Warri) is a particularly compelling case to explore these questions because it is the site of a global oil and gas industry operating within a pluri-ethnic federal system, and a complex social field of violence encompassing a panoply of contentious struggles (over chieftainship, autochthony, ethnic local government/wards, ethnic citizenship and other forms of the territory).

From Global Trade to Colonialism and the Rise of Ethnic Hegemony in Warri

Some historians based on oral tradition, material artefacts and meager written evidence, have argued that before the Portuguese adventure, internal trade existed across the Region, and also with peoples of the hinterland (Alagoya, 2005; Ikime, 1969). The foregoing historical analyses unveil a mutually beneficial socio-economic relationship amongst groups in the Niger Delta and beyond before the incursion of Portuguese trade merchants and colonialism into the Region, starting in the fifteenth century. However, the arrival of the Portuguese traders and later, imperial Britain changed the items and mode of trade and also affected the patterns of inter-ethnic social relations in the area including ethnic groups' independent political existence. The Niger Delta region became an outpost of global capitalism starting in the fifteenth century with the trans-Atlantic slave trade, palm oil trade, and finally the establishment of a British colony.
In Warri, Western Niger Delta, the arrival of Portuguese traders changed the dynamics of trade and interethnic relations among the groups. For one thing, the Itsekiri became middlemen between the hinterland markets and European merchants. The concentration of trade with the Itsekiri is attributed to their strategic location at the Benin River and their monarchical system of governance at the time (Alagoa, 1969, 151-157). The trans-Atlantic trade created the enabling environment for the growth of Warri as a kingdom independent from Benin (Ryder, 1960, 1-25). The 'gatekeeper' role played by the Itsekiri strengthened them politically, socially and economically; they became not merely wealthy due to commerce, but politically influential. As Ake (1981) rightly noted, economic dominance by one class over another induces gross inequality.

The British colonial rule, established on the flipside of global capitalist trade, simply annexed existing socio-political structures created by trade to affirm its presence and power in the Region. The colonial governance structures were constituted along ancient global trade routes in the Niger Delta. In fact, the establishment of colonial governance structures such as protectorates, provinces, divisions and districts further complicated the fragmentation of the Niger Delta. In these arbitrary administrative demarcations, friendly and hostile settlements alike were randomly stitched together with each other and with rival ethnic groups in the Region simply for managerial convenience. The establishment of colonial administrative units was determined geographically, rather than according to culture, language, kinship and/or other socio-political considerations. The colonial administrative units of governance introduced new forms of inter- and intra-group relations in the Region. These arbitrary created colonial administrative units resulted in new forms of identity, social and power relations that produced intra- and inter-group tensions. Indirect rule and attempts by colonial administrators to impose the hegemony of one ethnic group over others unveiled deep-seated existing differences; it also produced fresh and enduring ones. In parts of Nigeria, 'ethno-cultural cleavages were traditionally invoked for the purpose of
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enhancing the politics of the groups' cultural identity and 'hegemony' over others (Falola & Aderinto, 2010). The east-west bifurcation of the Delta communities and their successive fragmentation into colonial administrative units -- with other groups in most cases -- exacerbated disharmony and tensions. Thus, the two fundamental developments of the sixteenth - twentieth century (global trade in slave/palm oil and colonialism) laid the groundwork for the spatial dichotomy, political disintegration and ethnic violence that followed even to this day.

The colonial government in Nigeria did very little to address critical ethnic troubles that arose as a consequence of indirect rule imposed on the locals. Under the multi-ethnic nature of the Niger Delta and Nigeria in general, customary rule (chiefly hegemony) transformed into an instrument of domination by 'favoured' ethnic groups (and/or elites) over others. The introduction of customary (chiefly) rule or local governance by colonial authorities produced new myriad forms of identity and public spaces (Ekeh, 1975, 91-112). In the periphery, ethnicity reinforced access to and control over land (territory) and thereby presented a dual notion of subjects – autochthons and immigrants (original settlers and strangers). In most cases, which ethnic group(s) precisely were autochthonic to particular spaces became a contested issue. Any inquiry into autochthonic contestations would unveil contrasting narratives of past events in contemporary conflicts over space and political power.

The Colonial British government appointed Itsekiri trade merchants as 'governors' in Warri.3 On July 12th, 1884, Nana Olomu an

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3 Starting from the 1890s, the British had taken practical steps towards a direct full implementation of colonial rule, rather than use the Royal Niger Company (a company which has been dominant in the region since the palm oil trade). Hence, in 1891 the British established the Niger Coast Protectorate with several districts in the Niger Delta. In Western Delta, three districts were established: Benin River District, Sobo District and Warri District.
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influential Itsekiri merchant, was appointed governor. Just four days after his appointment, he signed a 'protection 'treaty' with Britain that brought the entire Benin River under British protection (Ikime 1968, 50-96). It is imperative to acknowledge that the British did not consult with Itsekiri neighbours in the Western Delta, namely, Ijaw and Urhobo (Ekeh, 2004, 17). This is the context in which the attempt to extend letters of this treaty to other ethnic groups in the Warri region was resisted and generated persistent rivalry in the Bight of Benin. The British Administrator Consul Hewett, (1884-1890s) extended the Itsekiri-British Treaty of 1884 to cover non-Itsekiri territories in Benin River. In a further twist, the Ijaw of River Forcados were reported to have entered into their own 'protection 'treaty' in 1888 in which they ceded their territory to the Royal Niger Company but was retrieved from the community at gunpoint.4

Again, Chief Dore Numa used his position as Chief Agent of the British to sign leases for parcels of land for his British friends without the consent of the other ethnic groups; he did this in 1906, 1908 and 1911.5 These early twentieth century Warri land leases, signed by Chief Dore Numa, were, and remain the primary basis of Itsekiri claim to ownership of Warri lands. The Itsekiri claim that Chief Dore

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4 See, MacDonald, “Report of Her Majesty’s Commissioner to the Niger and Oil Rivers” in January 1889 and submitted in 1890; In order to uphold the authority of Nana Olomu, Consul Hewett dismissed the Royal Niger Company treaty entered with the Ijaw as not binding, on grounds that the Ijaw were subjects of Nana Olomu. Hewett therefore petitioned the Home office to decline recognition of the Ijaw-Royal Niger Company treaty. MacDonald was commissioned to investigate the incident and, after an extensive tour of the area and interviews with Ijaw elders as well as Governor Nana Olomu, noted that Nana had gone to the Ijaw communities with a British gunboat and forced them to surrender their copies of the treaties. He also noted that “Nana failed entirely to show him that he ever had any right or power over Ijaw” in Benin River. According to MacDonald, the Ijaw story, which he believed, was that they have never been subjects of Nana, but that the latter was a good friend. MacDonald wholeheartedly accepted the stories as told by intelligent Ijaw elders he interrogated. Despite MacDonald’s report, the 1884 Itsekiri-British protection treaty and subsequent inclusion of independent groups, without their consent, was at the core of Itsekiri hegemony over other groups and provided foundation to their sole claim to ownership of Warri and the surrounding areas.

5 For instance, Ogbe-Ijoh and Agbassa lands allegedly belonging to Ijaw and Urhobo were signed out by Dore Numa as leases to the British without the knowledge of the people.
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Numa -- a Chief they never appointed -- acted on their behalf in signing the Warri land leases with his British allies. Nevertheless, since the twentieth century, the Ijaw and Urhobo have challenged the validity of the leases. The Urhobo and Ijaw mobilization against Itsekiri domination reached a climax with the introduction of taxes in 1926. In parallel with the tax regime being resisted in Aba in 1929, there was similar resistance in Warri, where aggrieved Urhobo and Ijaw residents mobbed Itsekiri tax officers. The tax regime riots and perceived resentment over Itsekiri domination in the Western Delta caused the British to undertake native administration reform in 1932. The reform saw the emergence of new divisions: Jekri-Sobo Division, Sobo Division, and Western Ijaw Division. The creation of Western Ijaw and Sobo Division did not completely resolve the problem of domination because some Ijaw and Urhobo settlements were still retained within Warri Division. The geography of these communities and relatedly, a raft of lawsuits over land ownership (e.g., Gbaramatu vs. Itsekiri; Ogbe-Ijoh vs. Itsekiri) were used to justify the colonial officers' decision to retain them in Warri Division. The Ijaw, Urhobo and Itsekiri, therefore, have a long history of strained relationship arising from boundary disputes and political discrimination.

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6 For instance, the District Officer at Forcados had informed the visiting Lieutenant Governor from the Southern Province that the “attitude of the people seems to be ‘we will pay if Warri pays’”. The assessment and taxation of much of the Division will present a problem similar to that found among fishing settlements in the Rio Del Rey area.” (National Archive Ibadan (NAI)/Colonial Secretary Office (C.S.O) 26/File No. 09098, Vol. No. IV “Inspection Notes by Lieutenant Governor, Southern Province”, December 1926 & January 1927).

7 The height of administrative reforms and political discrimination against the Western Ijaw was the 1940s relocation of divisional headquarters from Forcados to Warri rather than Bomadi, as demanded by the Western Ijaw Native Council. In general, Western Ijaw communities were less impacted than other ethnic groups by British imperial rule in the region. The mangrove swampy terrain made it difficult for colonial officers to gain unfettered access to Ijaw settlements. The ecology contributed to the lack of social, educational, human, political, economic and infrastructural development of Ijaw territories. Thus, in comparison to other ethnic groups in the Western Delta, the Ijaw are said to have benefitted the least materially.

territorial claims dating back to the nineteenth century (Moore, 1936, 44-83). In sum, the fundamental keys to understanding the conflict dynamics in Warri are: the 1884 Itsekiri-treaty extension to other groups and the Itsekiri claim to Warri lands based on leases signed by Dore Numa.

**Warri 'Ownership' and Quest for Political Space**

Contemporary conflicts in Africa are fought over old and new claims to land ownership, territory, autochthony and political citizenship (Dunn, 2009, 113-127; Yuval-Davis, 2010, 261-280; Geschiere, & Jackson, 2006). Scholars have argued that most internal conflicts in Africa borders on the questions concerning autochthony (first settler/stranger) in the form of the politics of place, belonging, identity and contested citizenship (Hunter, 2016; Geschiere, 2005, 371-384; Yuval-Davis, 2006, 197-214; Mitchell, 2012, 267-287; Adebanwi, 2009, 349-363; Jackson, 2006). Conflicts in and around Warri, which have taken on a violent dimension in the last two decades (petro-period), can be traced to British colonial rule in the nineteenth century. Since the 1920s, the Urhobo and Ijaw settlements around Warri have been fighting this anomaly of land dispossession. They protested, petitioned and went to court to reclaim 'their' land, but most of the time they lost. The courts judgments were delivered on the strength of colonial documents/treaties that featured Itsekiri chiefs as signatories:

The coming of the British and their formal acquisition of land for government and other purposes raised, for the first time, the question of the title to land. The fact that it was Dogho (Dore), an Itsekiri, who signed the legal documents which conveyed the lands to government has remained a key factor favoring the Itsekiri claim in the
celebrated Warri land cases (Ikime, 1969, 255).

Several of these court cases were appealed at the Nigerian Supreme Court, some at the West African Court of Appeal and, others at the Privy Council in London (Imobighe et al., 2002). Moreover, the fact that all judgments up till 1936 favoured the Itsekiri did not deter the Urhobo and Ijaw from contesting Itsekiri claims to Warri land ownership. So, the question of the ownership of Warri land remains the most contentious and volatile issue in Itsekiri-Urhobo-Ijaw relations. The controversy over autochthony in Warri is a subject of great historical and legal disputation between Itsekiri, Urhobo and Ijaw. It is the question of the politics of co-habitation, given that various oral and written histories are evidently carefully concocted products. Warri is Nicos Poulantzas' (1978) classic instance of the territorialization of history and the historicization of space. It is instructive to note that crises generated by this question was engendered by colonialism, but was deepened by ethnic political action on chieftaincy and, in the contemporary period, transformed to an insurgency by government-oil firms' complicity. Ijaw-Itsekiri are at loggerheads over claims to lands in New-Warri or Ogbe-Ijoh, Benin River and the Escravos River environs. At the same time, Urhobo-Itsekiri are daggers drawn over ownership of Agbassa, Okere and Okumagba lands in Warri. Beyond the legal space and reliance on land leases signed by Dore Numa, other avenues to the resolution of this intractable problem are either rebuffed and/or

9 The Itsekiri have won most of the legal cases while the Ijaw and Urhobo have also won a small number. The Urhobo and Ijaw have insisted that the adjudications were based on fraudulent treaties/documents between the Itsekiri and colonial officers who favored them in the region. The judicial decisions are based on colonial treaties/relics and fabrications, hence have not brought respite to the region. Another important factor here is that the judicial decisions are not mutually beneficial to all the parties. The judicial decisions thus need to go beyond ascribing ownership to one group to informing the other group(s) who have inhabited Warri for centuries as their ancestral home where they own. The judgments do not take into account the fact that other groups have no other place to call home but where they were born and have lived for generations.
Land ownership squabble in Warri is long and protracted without any concrete steps by the government (colonial or post-colonial) to address it.

Since the late-1990s, the question of land ownership in Warri has turned violent. The Ijaw and Urhobo fought over land ownership in Aladja (the site of a gigantic steel company in Nigeria) and over Garigilo and Esama in 1996; the Ijaw and Itsekiri fought over ownership of Jones creek in 1996, and over LGA creation, relocation and ward delineation in, 1997, 1998, 1999, and 2003; and the Urhobo and Itsekiri fought over both land in 1999 and ward delineation in 2003. All the three groups have crossed paths over land squabbles in Warri. Recently, the extension of territorial claims for the whole of Warri Division by each of the three ethnic groups rather than for Warri urban itself has been attributed to the renewed violent armed conflict in the Region. It is conflict over space but layered by petro-politics. Several efforts by the Ijaw and Urhobo to have separate political administration units in Warri, distinct from the Itsekiri have been frustrated. The assumption here is that all lands around the Escravos River and Warri that were not included in Western Ijaw Division or Sobo Division belong to the Itsekiri. Britain’s 1930s reorganization of Native Authority along tribal/ethnic lines and the Richards constitution of 1946, which created the basis for regional

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10 For instance, Ikime (1969, 255) noted a petition by Ogbe-Ijoh Chiefs, which was vital to resolving the Warri ownership question but instead, was ignored (maybe due to partiality or unwillingness to mediate by the British). More recently, several Judicial Commissions and Panels instituted by government (both state and federal) to resolve the conflicts all have failed to produce a consensual outcome; these include the Justice Nnaemeka-Agu Commission (1993), Justice Al-Hassan Idoko Commission (1997), General Magashi Panel of Inquiry (1999), Prof. Tekena Tamuno Presidential Panel on Peace and Security (2000), the Gen. T.Y Danjuma Panel of Inquiry (2003) and others. In all of these, no government ‘white paper’ has been published with respect to the outcome of the findings and neither federal nor state governments have ever implemented recommendations from these Commissions or Panels.


12 NAI/Warri Province (W.P)/File No. 1452, “Separation from Itsekiri N.A. Annexation to Western Ijaw N.A: Petition from Ogbe-Ijaw People,” June 6, 1952.
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autonomy, failed in the reorganization of these groups into different political units in Warri due to geographical and legal hiccups. Also, demands of Ijaw and Urhobo to be incorporated into the Western Ijaw and Western Sobo Division respectively were rejected by the British due to their location amidst Itsekiri territory, and existent litigations over land ownership; spatial location and legal hitches were conveniently adduced as mitigating factors.

In Warri, the elections of 1955 were contested along ethnic lines between the Urhobo and Itsekiri. The Itsekiri aligned with the dominant political party in the Western Region (Action Group) and recorded a victory. In contrast, the Urhobo aligned with the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC), a party at the national level. Itsekiri alignment with the Western Regional party secured them political appointments. While Urhobo, on the other hand, aligned with NCNC with a view to realizing the creation of a Mid-West State in the Region. The Itsekiri and Ijaw were, it would appear, irreconcilable and uncomfortable with any arrangement that would make them subjugated minority ethnic nationalities in any new arrangement. Both groups preferred to join existing kinsmen provinces. As an alternative, the Ijaw demanded entry into Rivers State, while Itsekiri opted to join their Yoruba kinsmen in Ondo Province of Western Region, for fear of Urhobo and Igbo domination. However, when the Mid-West Region was eventually created in 1963, rather than resolve the problem, it merely aggravated and complicated it. Before then, in early 1959, the Western Regional Government established the Itsekiri Communal Lands Trust with the 'Olu' (King of Itsekiri) as Chairman. The

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13 File/W.P., 116/163/Resident Officer on the reorganization of Itsekiri Native Authority and the Ijaw Communities within; File/W.P., 116/165/Relocation of Itsekiri Native Authority Administration from Ode-Itsekiri to Warri in 1949.
Western Regional Government awarded this body statutory power to lease and regulate the tenure of Warri lands, but in practice, it was a carefully articulated ethnic political punch designed to floor other ethnic groups in the contest for Warri land ownership. The Ijaw and Urhobo protested the creation of the body on the grounds that it was a deliberate design by the Yoruba ethnic group to compensate the Itsekiri for their electoral support and thereby, deprive others of Warri land ownership. This action by the Western Regional government politically legitimized the Itsekiri claim to Warri land ownership and unlocked a floodgate of protests from Urhobo and Ijaw groups in the post-independence years.

The combination of inconclusive, ambiguous and ultimately undocumented histories of settlement and rule (including many distortions and fabrications of actual history), the complex and complicated changes associated with several centuries of deepening European involvement, and finally, colonial rule, fashioned a situation that is mostly intractable at the level of historical consensus. The complexity and confusion turn on two profound issues. The first is the political salience of ‘indigeneity’ in Nigerian politics. At independence in 1960, the granting of citizenship rights was matched by a commitment to the preservation of customary forms of rule, predicated on the notion of the indigenous group; this principle has been enshrined in the constitution. Consequently, indigeneity can be – and indeed always is – invoked as a basis for political claim-making. The second issue is the fact that the definition of who is an indigene (operational definitions that reflect the hegemony of particular systems of chiefly and territorial governance) has direct implications for the politics of territory (i.e., who can establish or is entitled to a State, an LGA, or at least an electoral ward) and for control over oil-bearing lands. The question of controlling and ‘owning’ Warri is, therefore, a question of the ways that indigenous groups can claim legal and legitimate access to land rights and hence oil rents, and to political institutions (local government or ward) that can confer on the chosen groups, legitimate rights to the revenue allocation process in Nigeria.
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Owning Warri is a ferocious competition to gain unhindered access to oil rents and social infrastructure through political autonomy.

Beyond the tri-fold claim to Warri land ownership, which is so intricately wrapped up with demands for political space, socio-economic empowerment, and resistance to one group’s domination, the change in nomenclature of the Itsekiri Monarch from 'Olu Itsekiri' to 'Olu of Warri' proved to be yet one more turbulent subject that created anxiety and conflict in and around Warri. On the installation of a new Itsekiri King in 1936, after nearly a century interregnum, a petition was sent to the Resident Officer, Warri, that the nomenclature of the new king be changed from 'Olu Itsekiri' to 'Olu of Warri.' The Resident Officer refused to accede to the Itsekiri request because it was a petition by one Edema Arubi (an Itsekiri) with no evidence that the Council backed his petition. Later the same year, during a visit of the Commissioner of Southern Province (Sir William Hun) to Warri, the Council requested the nomenclature changed to 'Olu of Warri.' The Commissioner saw nothing wrong with what he saw as a mere change in nomenclature but the Urhobo and Ijaw objected to the idea hence, and the Resident Officer withdrew his support saying, the accepted title is 'Olu Itsekiri.' From this point, the Itsekiri persevered even throughout the 1940s with proposals for the change on the ground that their capital city is Warri, and merely changing the nomenclature of their Monarch to reflect their home, as was customary in other places, was in order. Severally, the British rejected the request and sustained 'Olu Itsekiri' as the title. On one particular instance, the Senior Resident of Warri Province (Mr. Bowen), catalogued to the Secretary of the Western Region, all previous futile attempts by the Itsekiri to effect the change, explaining the reasons and describing the Urhobo and Ijaw objections to the proposal. The Resident Officer enumerated a quite

16 File/W.P. 86, Vol. I/Itsekiri petitions, letters, proposals, telegram, telephone calls for change in Monarch’s title in the 1940s
fair assessment of the grounds on which the Urhobo and Ijaw were opposed to the proposed change in nomenclature when he said:

The Urhobo and Western Ijaws are protesting against the use of the title Olu of Warri on the grounds that he was appointed Olu of Itsekiri and that the attempt to obtain the title Olu of Warri is intended to raise the prestige of the Olu over the other tribes in the Province and later to call him Olu of Warri Province. I have informed these Councils that Government has no intention of permitting such to be even considered. The arguments in regard to the Alake, Alafin and Oba are just met with the answer that they have always been so called. I was surprised at a recent meeting of the Western Ijaw Council to see the depth of feeling on this matter; the Itsekiris were called sly and cunning and nothing could make them believe that it was not the 'Olu's intention to attempt to become their overlord. For this I think the Itsekiris are much to be blamed. Frequent attempts by the Olu to interfere in the Ijaw lands of Forcados and Burutu, the Sapele land case, the unfortunate references of Edema Arubi to the Urhobos as slaves, which were not immediately repudiated by the Itsekiri Council, and the general idea of many of the Itsekiris that, they are a superior people and were civilized by contact with the Europeans long before the backward tribes of the hinterland, have led to a cumulative feeling of suspicion and distrust, which it appears quite
impossible to eradicate from the minds of the other tribes.¹⁷

Even though, Mr. Bowen was sympathetic to the Itsekiri demand but was quick to realize that such was politically inexpedient due to distrust among groups, hence; recommended 'Olu Itsekiri'. Opposition to the change was also motivated by existing litigations over land ownership in and around Warri. Their thinking was that, what the Itsekiri failed to achieve through political, historical and legal processes, they wanted to realize through the cover of the Crown, which they antagonistically opposed. Mindful of political tensions the change could attract, even at the expense of being accused as collaborators, British Officers considered 'Olu of Warri' a misnomer and overruled it.

However, the 1951 Regional Government elections and Itsekiri alliance with Action Congress (AG) forming the government of the Western Region introduced a twist into the change in royal nomenclature in Warri. The Western House of Assembly richly rewarded Chief Arthur Prest (an Itsekiri) for his election to the central legislature: First, an appointment as the Central Minister of Communications; second, without consultation and disregarding all protests changed the Itsekiri Monarch's nomenclature from 'Olu Itsekiri' to 'Olu of Warri' in May 1952 (Ikime, 1936). Urhobo and Ijaw reacted angrily to the change in the title by writing to the Western Region government to rescind its decision. The Urhobo argued that the unwarranted change in title was made without any justification, considering that Warri town was composed of people from various ethnic groups among which the Urhobo and Ijaw constitute the earliest and majority settlers.¹⁸ They asserted that the change was

¹⁷ File/W.P. 86, Vol. I/ Bowen (Senior Resident Officer, Warri) Letter to The Secretary, Western Province rejecting change of title, 1944.
bound to have far-reaching consequences with regard to the progressive development of Warri town. The British noted the change in title had made groups more than ever antagonistic to the Itsekiri. It may cause them never to cooperate with them in the near future.\textsuperscript{19} The title changes further strained relationships between Itsekiri and other ethnic groups in Warri and contributed to the Ijaw and Urhobo recurring demand for distinct political spaces. The decision attracted protest from within and outside the Region.\textsuperscript{20}

Urhobo and Ijaw representatives in the Western House of Assembly also impressed on the Western Region Minister for Local Government, Chief Obafemi Awolowo, to revisit the matter, in light of the feverish tensions in Warri over the change. But the Minister's response to the representatives was to the effect that 'the decision had been taken in good faith and after careful consideration.'\textsuperscript{21} In order to placate their constituents back home, the representatives suggested a change in the name of the province from Warri Province to Delta Province.\textsuperscript{22} A meeting on this subject involving Itsekiri, Ijaw, Urhobo, Isoko and the Minister for Local Government in Ibadan, merely reiterated the position that the change in the Itsekiri Monarch's nomenclature could not be reversed.\textsuperscript{23} But as a compromise, the Minister informed the delegation of a possible change in the name of the province from Warri Province to Delta Province. Even so, the mere change in name of the province was not enough to placate the anger already created in the land. Expectedly,

\textsuperscript{19} File/W.P. 1/1452/Resident Officer response to Ijaw demand for autonomy in Warri
\textsuperscript{20} For instance, the Ijaw State Union, an umbrella Ijaw organization, sent a petition calling on the Lieutenant Governor to reverse the change in the nomenclature of the Itsekiri monarch.
\textsuperscript{21} File/W.P. 1/File No. 86/2/Western Region Minister for Local Government, Chief Obafemi Awolowo’s response to Urhobo and Ijaw representatives in the Western House of Assembly on the need to reverse the change in Itsekiri Monarch’s title due to tensions generated in Warri by the change
\textsuperscript{22} The decision to change the name of the province from Warri Province to Delta Province was to disassociate the Province from the ‘Olu’ nomenclature.
\textsuperscript{23} File/W.P.2/File No. 86/3/Memo of meeting involving Itsekiri, Ijaw, Urhobo, Isoko and the Minister for Local Government in Ibadan on change in Olu’s title, the Minister reiterated his position that the title change had come to stay.
it did not take long before the Itsekiri changed most nomenclature with the term Itsekiri to Warri; for example, the Itsekiri National Union was now Warri National Union, and chiefs such as 'Ologbotsere of Itsekiri' now went by the title 'Ologbotsere of Warri.'

Violence erupted over the change when the Central Minister for Communications, Chief Arthur Prest, fingered as the architect of the change, proposed a tour of Warri in September 1952. While Urhobo mobilized to stop the Minister's proposed tour because they considered it a mockery of other ethnic groups in Warri, Itsekiri, on the other hand, mobilized to give their native son a rousing welcome – for a job well done – violent conflict was imminent. A quick intervention by the Resident of the Province (Curwen), advising the Minister of Communication to suspend his proposed visit due to palpable tension averted a full-scale armed conflict and bloodbath.24 Even then, it was an action taken a little too late; an Urhobo group had already attacked an Itsekiri welcome procession and in a matter of minutes, the whole of Warri town and environs were engulfed in violent conflict. The violence spread to Urhobo towns fighting with Itsekiri settlements around Warri (Ikime, 1969). The violence left extensive damage to property and scores of Itsekiri wounded but the swift intervention of the police, brought the situation to normalcy, and no lives were lost. In anger, the Urhobo and Ijaw boycotted the Warri main market. The Ijaw, who declared the Itsekiri their 'bitterest political enemies'25 returned to the Ogbe-Ijoh market as their main area of commerce. The Urhobo established a new market at Igbudu and instructed their people to stop selling food stuffs to the Itsekiri (Ikime 1969). The change in Monarch's nomenclature worsened ethnic relations in Warri.

24 File/W.P. 2/File No. 86/3/Resident of Warri Province telegram and telephone messages to the Minister of Communication to suspend his visit to Warri
25 File/W.P. 2/File No. 86/2/Ogbe-Ijoh District Council to the Resident Officer Warri Province, 1953
At the heart of the conflict, however, is the introduction of a totally alien policy of supremacy of one group over others, which is not only bizarre, but also inconsistent with pre-colonial inter-ethnic relations that existed amongst ethnic groups in Warri. Of recent, this history of contentions and conflict in Warri has been renewed and expanded by both post-colonial demands for political citizenship and petro-politics.

**Post-Colonial Petro-Politics and the Rise of Petro-Militancy in Warri**

The Warri crises became complicated with the commencement of oil exploration in the area, particularly when the oil companies began to pay 'royalties' and compensation for 'surface rights' to landowners. As a result, territorial claims in Warri were intensified amongst the three ethnic groups including the Ijaws who had hitherto been maritime nomads but who now began to pitch permanent tents on land. Hence, a new dimension was introduced into the conflict in the area and this has since heightened the rivalry among the three ethnic groups because the more territory each ethnic group could claim, the more the access to 'royalties' and other socio-economic benefits (Report of the T.Y. Danjuma Presidential Committee on Warri Crises, September, 2003).

At independence in 1960, the Itsekiri dominance in Warri, which they had undertaken under the cover of British colonial rule, was consolidated. As willing allies of early Portuguese traders and, later, British colonial rule in the Region, they had been empowered educationally, economically, socially and politically. The Itsekiri were better positioned for post-independence Nigeria than any other ethnic group by virtue of their educational and political attainments.
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at the local and regional levels. The Ijaw were relegated to the background and had no place, while the Urhobo were not politically obvious until after independence at the Western Region cabinet. The Itsekiri political affiliation to the Action Group party and the political favour they had secured at the regional level further increased the antagonism and strained their social relations with other ethnic nationalities. Also, the political achievements of Itsekiri and especially their control of the machinery of governance at local and regional levels helped consolidate their claim to political citizenship in Warri.

Mid-Western Region was created out of the Western Region in 1963, with Dennis Osadebay from Benin (also called Bini) as Administrator. The creation of the Mid-West Region by the union of Benin and Delta Provinces generated enormous controversy. In any case, the Urhobo had demanded and worked tirelessly for its creation. The Mid-West Region creation and subsequent military incursion into the political turf beginning January 1966 did not in

26 For instance, Chief Festus Okotie-Eboh an Itsekiri, an associate of Nnamdi Azikwe was elected into the Western Region House of Assembly in 1951. He was elected treasurer of one of the major political parties in the country NCNC and became the Minister of Finance in 1957. He was re-elected into the Western Region House of Assembly in 1959. Chief Ekwejunor-Etche was also made a minister while Alfred Rewane was the political secretary of Chief Obafemi Awolowo, leader of Action Congress (AG) party.

27 While two Itsekiri, Chief Webber Egbe and Chief Erejuwa, were appointed Regional Commissioners, an Urhobo, Chief T.E.A. Salubi was appointed commissioner for education in 1962 by the administration of Majekodunmi, M. A., who became sole Administrator of Western Region after the declaration of a state of emergency. The Ijaw had no representation at the regional level of governance.

28 As expected, the Urhobo dominated the list of political appointees to the new Mid-West Region at inception; for the Itsekiri it confirmed their fears of domination. Chief Okotie-Eboh, the influential Itsekiri leader at the national sphere, however, used his political capital to incorporate into the Western Region’s legal instrument, a section safeguarding the interest of minorities through the creation of four “Special Minority Areas.” This section, purportedly enacted to take care of the minorities, allocated the representation of Warri Division only to Itsekiri indigenes, to the detriment of the other ethnic nationalities. Even though the Urhobo and Ijaw of Warri Division protested their exclusion from political participation in Warri, nothing was done to correct the inequality.
any way resolve this ethnic political quagmire; rather, it increased the rivalry and gulf that existed between Warri's three major ethnic groups (Itsekiri, Ijaw and Urhobo). Lt. Col. David Ejoor, an Urhobo, and Maj. Samuel Ogbemudia from Benin, who became military Administrators of Mid-West Region in 1966-67 and 1967-75 respectively, were said to have favoured the Itsekiri with appointments into the regional cabinet with respect to the controversial structural change that was popularly known as the Warri Division. In 1967, during the civil war, the Mid-West Region's status was changed to Bendel State with the transformation of Nigeria from four-region structure to twelve-state structure of governance. Again, on August 27th, 1991, Bendel State was carved further into two states: Edo and Delta States. Throughout the military and civilian regimes that emerged, the ethnic apprehension and rivalry between the Itsekiri, Ijaw and Urhobo over Warri and its representation did not abate. From 1991, the tensions were exacerbated by the creation of Delta State because the Ijaw and Urhobo received little or no representation in governance. The near-total Itsekiri control of political offices, governance structures, and socio-economic activities in Warri inspired a renewed clamour for distinct homogenous local government area. The discovery of Oil in Warri and environs in the early 1960s heightened the dispute over land ownership (in the form of indigeneity rights) between Ijaw, Urhobo and Itsekiri. Land ownership conferred benefits: royalty payments (oil rents), contract awards, employment and corporate social responsibility projects. As earlier discussed, there were clear traces of contentious ethnic relations in Warri arising from territorial claims, political exclusion and deprivation, which long predate oil exploration, but the derivable benefits from the ownership of petro-spaces deepened it. Oil reawakened the politics of space (i.e., who is indigenous or entitled to a State, Local Government Area, LGA, and or at the minimum an electoral ward) and control of oil-bearing spaces. In Warri and elsewhere in Nigeria political institutions (LGA and/or wards) are the legitimate access to land and the revenue allocation process. So, contest over political institutions in Warri among ethnic groups is tantamount to competition over, and access
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to land, and inclusion in the revenue allocation practice in the Nigerian federation. Even though the incursion of Oil is a new complication to conflict in Warri, economic and neoliberal scholars, and corporate boardroom analysts, have erroneously termed it a variant of the 'resource-'curse' narrative ('oil- curse'). On its face, conflict in Warri and environs appears as a classic instance of resource-predation and greed over a grievance.

Beginning in the 1960s, exploration and production of Oil and attempts by groups to lay claim to oil-bearing spaces in Warri and environs heightened pre-oil ethnic tensions (autochthony and political autonomy) in varied forms. Post-colonial Warri, in a sense, is the history of the reconfiguration and contestation over oil-endowed lands and revenue allocation process. Shell Petroleum Development Company (SPDC) and Chevron-Texaco are the major International Oil Companies (IOCs) in Warri and environs. Since the start of oil activities in the Region, there has been tension between Ijaw, Itsekiri and Urhobo over royalty payments and host community status/benefit projects in the territory. Itsekiri claim that the lands where IOCs are located wholly belong to them by virtue of their claim to ownership on all lands in Warri and environs. By virtue of this claim, the Ijaw of the Escravos River have never been recognized as host communities and equally neglected in all spheres of benefits. The lack of attention by IOCs toward other groups since inception was ascribed to their political exclusion and the overbearing influence of the Itsekiri. It is, therefore, the twin

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29 In the Escravos River for example, SPDC owns and operates Jones creek, Egwa I and Egwa II flow-stations, while Chevron-Texaco owns and operates the Utunana, Dibi, Alero, Makaraba and Abiteye flow-stations.

30 No Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) relationship exists between the Ijaw communities and oil companies in the region since the 60s. Before 1997 no Gbaramatu Ijaw was employed in any oil company, and to date none is in the employment of Shell, while Chevron have only about 20 persons in their employ, though not in the senior cadre. No developmental project was undertaken in any Ijaw community until 2006 at the peak of the conflict. Shell was compelled to deploy 20 generators to Ijaw communities as community development in the area in 2006 as peace initiative.
neglect of political governance and corporate social responsibility that facilitates the post-independence insistence by excluded groups on the creation of autonomous LGA.

Nigeria's post-independence centralization of political power and oil revenues - and the corresponding decline in derivation and emergence of Federation Revenue Mobilization and Distribution Process suggests that state, LGA (or ward) creation was necessary condition to gain access into and benefit from the federation revenues. In the Niger Delta, Oil became a resource on which claims to political citizenship and land ownership is (re)produced. This equally explains the proliferation of states and LGAs in Nigeria (without recourse to viability). In Warri, desire for autonomous LGAs and ethnic claims to land ownership provoked new and varied forms of conflict starting from the 1990s.\(^\text{31}\) It is in the light of this that the late 1990s creation of Warri South-West LGA for the Ijaw and its relocation (after being in operation for more than four months) to an Itsekiri settlement and subsequent unequal wards delineation, is viewed (and rightly so) as the remote cause of the conflict which has ravaged Warri and environs for over two decades (Courson, 2007).

In late March 1997, when all peaceful resolutions by elders and opinion leaders in the Region and beyond failed, on the relocation of the LGA headquarters to an Ijaw settlement, the youth stepped into the fray. Before now (especially in Ijaw territories), decades of socio-political deprivation have left in its wake a deep well of anger on an army of uneducated, unemployed and frustrated youth, many of whom are profoundly convinced that their future will be one of exclusion, poverty, misery, rejection and existential threat amidst petro-dollars. They genuinely long for a sense of human security and development, and inclusion in the Nigerian petro-project. They are greatly convinced that they can only be saved through militant activism to restore their identity, humanity and citizenship, the loss of which they attribute to colonial and local elites' collusion. They

\(^{31}\) In 1991, Warri LGA was split into two LGAs (Warri North and Warri South) yet Itsekiri dominated by virtue of the location of the headquarters in their territories.
believe that the Nigerian State has become akin to a tormentor-in-chief that needs to be confronted and the world as it is should be brought to the know about their plight. For this to happen, they deployed everything and all energy into the LGA relocation struggle that has earned Warri a pride space in the global scale of violence. At the heart of the contemporary conflict is the quest for distinct political administration that would confer on excluded ethnic groups, empowerment and customary right to lands.

Ijaw youth groups embarked upon strategic direct mass action by peacefully occupying six flow-stations in the Escravos River to draw government attention to their plight. The youth mass action shut-in over 400,000 barrels per day. The youth action was a huge threat to the nation's life-support. Hence, the federal government, with logistical support from IOCs (SPDC and Chevron), deployed military troops to forcefully evict the youths from the flow-stations. Ijaw considered the forceful eviction, loss of lives and assault on settlements to the government-IOCs-Itsekiri alliance. They also viewed the logistical support by IOCs for military troops as tactical support for their Itsekiri rivals. The situation and its various analyses led to full-scale violence between Ijaw-Itsekiri on the hand, Ijaw-federal military troops on the other, and the emergence of militias in the three ethnic groups, for self-defense. Between 1997 and the return to civil rule in May 1999, escalating violence between ethnic groups (Ijaw, Urhobo and Itsekiri) in Warri and environs, led to over 200 deaths and the destruction of more than ten settlements. By May 1999 the oil fields in Western Delta (especially Warri and the Escravos River) were barely operational, with several oil facilities compromised and over 500,000 bpd shut-in. The situation degenerated to the extent that the first bill Governor, James Ibori (an Urhobo) of Delta State-sponsored to the House of Assembly was advocating the relocation of the LGA headquarters back to Ogbe-Ijoh, an Ijaw settlement. Although the Itsekiri protested the relocation bill, the Delta State parliament passed it into law in
September 1999.\textsuperscript{32} In any case, a twist in wards delineation changed almost nothing in the relocation: in the new arrangement, Ijaw and Itsekiri were allotted 4 and 6 wards respectively.\textsuperscript{33} This merely shifted the target of Ijaw demand from LGA headquarters to the equitable delineation of wards and constituencies.

Between 2000 and mid-2005 the Escravos River axis of Warri became the epicentre of ethnic violence that claimed several lives and the annihilation of settlements. President Olusegun Obasanjo's deployment of a particular security outfit (Joint Task Force: JTF) into Warri and surrounding windy creeks incensed further violence. What followed from this was severe inter-ethnic violence, on the one hand, and ethnic militia and federal military troops on the other. In the post-election violence of 2003, Warri was tagged the most dangerous city in Nigeria: scores of people killed, property damaged, and villages destroyed (Tell Magazine, 2003). Several people were rendered internally displaced persons (IDP), and the creeks became uninhabitable. During this period there were escalated attacks on critical oil facilities by youth militia, the shutdown of oil facilities, and evacuation of workers by oil majors due to insecurity – leading to the closure of all Western operations (over 35 per cent of oil output shut-in). Warri and its surrounding creeks were turned into a mini war zone by the various wars waged by Ijaw, Itsekiri, Urhobo and the federal military troops deployed into the Region.

Securitization of the Region and government failure to resolve a local political logjam in an amicable and timely manner, contributed to the transformation of disparate ethnic militias into an organic

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Three out of the four Itsekiri members in the Delta State Assembly staged a walkout and took the Government to court. The case is still pending. The only Itsekiri member who stayed back was the Speaker of the State Assembly, Late Hon. Francis Emegbele.
\item The Ijaw had before now boycotted the Ward delineation exercise of 1998 and also did not partake in the 1999 elections. They claimed (relying on the 1991 census figures) that they had 63 percent of the population in the LGA but were reduced to four wards, while the Itsekiri with 37 percent of the population had six wards. The Itsekiri have also contested this figure. They have also claimed to be in the majority.
\end{enumerate}
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regional insurgency group the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) in late 2005. Between 2005 and 2009, it was a cross-Delta militant ethnic nationalism (Courson, 2011, 20-43) insurgent movement. In February 2016, after a period of relative peace in the wake of the Nigerian government’s 2009 amnesty program, a new militant group emerged in the area, referred to as Niger Delta Avengers (NDA) (Courson, 2017). Ike Okonta was therefore right when he said, 'behind the mask of the militant is a political subject forced to pick up an AK47 to restore his rights as a citizen' (Okonta, 2006). The emergence of MEND and post-amnesty rise of NDA from the Escravos River fringe, Delta State, draws even greater national, regional and global attention to the Warri question.

Conclusion

It is evident from the above analysis that the inter-ethnic conflicts and contentious politics and chieftaincy in Warri are a direct consequence of the trans-Atlantic trade and British colonial policies in Western Niger Delta. Itsekiri dominance in the Region was bolstered by their early access to the trans-Atlantic traders and supported by successive British colonial administration. I have shown that tensions and crisis arose in Warri mainly as a result of bringing to the same fold, distinct groups who had lived and are accustomed to sovereign existence since the ages. The foundation of the conflicts is resistance against the over-lordship of one group over others in a setting in which the colonial state reinforced ethnic identity and commercial interests and exacerbated inter-group relations and material interests.

These age-old, unresolved, and highly contentious issues of land ownership wrapped in the quest for citizenship rights and the demand for change in Monarch's nomenclature have produced a multi-headed hydra in Warri and beyond. The contemporary crisis (popularly dubbed 'oil-violence') in Warri is conveniently layered on age-old land and political squabbles. The struggle of groups for
Elias COURSON

oil-bearing lands and to create legitimate access through local
government to revenue derived from such oil production
transformed a relatively simple local demand for political
citizenship into a regional, national, and global demand for civic
nationalism.

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