

# UNIVERSITY OF ILORIN



**THE TWO HUNDRED AND SIXTY-THIRD (263<sup>RD</sup>)  
INAUGURAL LECTURE**

**“CRUDE BUT SWEET ANATOMY OF THE  
DEVIL'S EXCRETA”**

*By*

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**DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY AND  
INTERNATIONAL STUDIES,  
FACULTY OF ARTS,  
UNIVERSITY OF ILORIN, NIGERIA.**

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**The Vice-Chancellor**

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All other Academic Colleagues,  
All Non-Academic Staff,  
My Lords Spiritual and Temporal,  
Gentlemen of the Print and Electronic Media,  
Distinguished Guests,  
Ladies and Gentlemen.

## **Preamble**

I give glory and adoration to God for a day like this. For the records, this is the third inaugural lecture from the Department of History. The first inaugural lecture titled, “The Great Tradition and its Impact on Modern Africa: Archaeological and Historiographical Reflections’, was delivered on 19<sup>th</sup> January, 1984 by Professor Ade Obayemi. The second inaugural lecture titled, ‘The Image of Africa: Rhetoric and Reality of Afro-European Relations’, was delivered on 4<sup>th</sup> August, 2011 by Professor R. O. Lasisi. I am standing on a firm foundation rooted in the history of the establishment of the Better By Far University because the Department of History, apart from being one of the first departments in the university, has produced two Presidents and four Fellows of the Historical Society of Nigeria. That I am before you this day to deliver the third inaugural lecture from the Department of History and International Studies is by the grace of God.

## **Introduction: Odyssey of a Homo Historicus**

My choice of history as a course of study was driven by my inherent passion for the subject. I did not study history out of no better choice. History was my first and only choice when I filled out my JAMB Direct Entry form. My interest in the course was partly stimulated by my father, Late Chief Owhemaluena Single Aghalino Owhoruke, who was more of our village griot. His mastery of the history of my village and the clan was legendary. Again, my teacher at the Notre Dame College, Ozoro, Mr. Ezekiel Agbodo, taught the history of the Ghana empire as though he was a participant. In class, through my mind's eye, we could see the warriors during the Almoravid invasion, the glory of the Oyo empire and the affluence and influence of Mansa Musa and Idris Alooma. We imagined the energy and prowess of Queen Amina, Moremi and Emotan. To us, Jaja of Opopo and Nana of Ebrohimi were enigma. Mr. Vice Chancellor, in my quest to study the history of oil and gas exploration and production, I chose to concentrate on aspects of the social, environmental and economic history. Aspects of the history of the Niger Delta engaged the scholarly endeavours of several historical intellectual giants such as Dike (1956), Alagoa (1972), Ikime (1977), Ofonagoro (1979), Tamuno (2011), and a host of others. I stood on the enabling shoulders of these intellectuals to ply my trade.

I was born and raised in Owhelogbo, in Isokoland of the present-day Delta State. I saw firsthand how crude the prospect for crude oil could be and we were told that the only way to work in the oil industry is for us to acquire requisite education. We were propelled by the quest for the good life: good cars, good houses and the prospect of working offshore and possibly living in Shell quarters in Warri or Port Harcourt. After my first degree, we came close to the crude reality and were awoken by the rude shock that getting a job in the oil industry was more of a mirage. I convinced my elder brother who is seated here that perhaps it is because the first degree was not competitive enough for entry into the oil industry and thus, I had to enroll for my Master's degree. At the completion of my Masters, with my head still in the cloud, I was sure of getting the desired placement

even when my mentor and *oga*, Professor H. O. Danmole mooted the idea of me teaching in the Department of History, I gave it a cold shoulder and went to Lagos to see my cousin who secured a job for me at *Newswatch Magazine*. Behold, I could not assume duty because of the June 12 crisis. Again, I was happy that I was not subjected to the ‘menial job of a reporter and proofreader’ because my destiny was in the oil industry. Mr. Vice Chancellor, this background is necessary because it later shaped the choice of my research topic for my Ph.D. Indeed, because Prof. H. O. Danmole took me like a son and he worked assiduously to get me into the Department of History, University of Ilorin. On 3<sup>rd</sup> March, 1995 I assumed duty as Assistant Lecturer. Without much ado, Professor H. O. Danmole insisted I hit the ground running and I registered for my Ph.D. programme. I opted to conduct research on the oil industry, which was already taking its toll on the people of the Niger Delta. When I was invited for an assessment interview, I was drilled extensively on the choice of my proposed research topic. It was claimed that my thesis topic, which was Oil and Gas Exploration and Production in the Western Niger Delta, was not viable; that it was ‘hot’ history. Trust historians for their fetish for ‘old’ history!

The fact is that historians are remarkably muted about the environmental aspects of mineral extraction, and generally, environmental history. Despite its status as a favourable field of enquiry, ‘mining is still something of a stepchild of modern environmental history’ (Pesa and Ross, 2021, p.2). For us, it was important to bring historical perspective to bear on the literature available on crude oil business in the Niger Delta. Historical perspective is important because, as Ballard and Banks (2003, p. 298) have rightly noted, the effects of extractive industries are everywhere mediated by ‘a positioning that draws upon historically sedimented practices, landscape, and repertoires of meaning that emerges through particular patterns of engagement and struggle’. Mr. Vice Chancellor, my research endeavours, which are tailored around the oil and gas industry, are aspects of economic, environmental and social history and are embedded in my avowed interest and my background. My inaugural lecture

topic encapsulates my odyssey in the intricate industry which is crude but sweet. Thus, the title of my presentation is 'Crude but Sweet Anatomy of the Devil's Excreta'. As I navigate the deciduous historical, but intellectual forest, my point of departure will become more manifest.

### **The Niger Delta as Theatre of Sweet Crude**

The Niger Delta is the theatre of my research. I have demonstrated in my publications that the festering impasse in the region must be examined from the perspective of history because the root causes of the present crisis lay deep in the past (**Aghalino, 2011**). The Niger Delta remains one of the critical fault lines of Nigerian politics and economy. As the region that holds Nigeria's predominant oil and gas reserves, it has assumed a new geo-political importance within the context of the global energy mix. Right from the pre-colonial period, oily friction has been a recurring decimal. Indeed, the problem of the Niger Delta and its peculiar terrain engaged the attention of the colonial state and this necessitated the setting up of Sir Henry Willink's Commission, to among other things, recommend the best strategies for the development of the region (The Willinks Commission Report, 1958). With the commercial exploitation of oil which commenced in 1956, well over \$600 billion has accrued to the Nigerian state. Despite this, the region is desperately poor and lags behind in most developmental indices. This situation has precipitated protests, restiveness, and in the extreme, and overtime, militancy, which has disrupted the oil business and concomitantly, a shortfall in the much-needed foreign exchange for the government. The conflict in the Niger Delta has taken very dangerous dimension with the proliferation of militant groups in the region. This, perhaps, is not unconnected with the fact that since 1999, democracy has provided vent and latitude for the people to perversely express their discontent with the state and the oil industry (**Aghalino, 2013** and Omotola, 2016).

The Niger Delta region has an estimated population of 28 million, covering an area of 70,000 square kilometres, with some 5,000 communities. It is also one of the world's three



largest mangrove forests covering about 6, 000 square kilometres and it is the largest wetland in Africa (Courson, 2009; Naanen, 1995; Oronto, Von Kemedi, Okonta and Watts, 2004). It comprised 50 ethnic groups and 250 dialects. The irony of the region is that this swampy region is home to Nigeria's enormous oil and gas wealth, which constitutes the mainstay of Nigeria's economy (**Aghalino, 2012d**). The region is not only rich in oil and gas but in other natural resources like timber and wildlife. The significant feature of the Niger Delta is the general state of underdevelopment, not only by world standards but also in relation to many parts of the country. Currently, Nigeria is the eighth largest oil-exporting country in the world with oil revenue accounting for about 80 per cent of total government revenue, 95 per cent of foreign exchange earnings, 40 per cent of contribution to Gross Domestic Product and about 4 per cent of employment. Nigeria's proven oil reserves are estimated to be 37.2 billion barrels, while the country's natural gas reserves are even more, estimated at well over 188 trillion standard cubic feet (Watts, 2007). As at January 2023, Nigeria's oil reserves dropped to 36.9 billion barrels, while there was a rise in natural gas reserves to the tune of 208.83 trillion cubic feet (Ariemu, 2023). Worthy of note is that the Niger Delta region of Nigeria is the goose that lays the golden egg.

Mr. Vice Chancellor, right from the 1450s, there has been change in the political economy of the Niger Delta. It was from this period that the inhabitants of the region began to engage with a succession of European explorers, missionaries, slavers, colonial exploiters and post-colonial political leaders and local compradors. Let it be established from the outset that palm oil and palm kernel were the initial sylvan products that brought fame and infamy to the Niger Delta and set the stage for outright exploitation of the region not in the Lugardian classical sense of dual mandate (Lugard, 1965), but mere production for the metropolis (Falola, 1987). In this sense, our initial historical labour was in trying to unravel the palm oil business as a precursor to the interrogation of crude and black gold.

## **From Palm oil to Crude Oil**

Mr. Vice Chancellor sir, in the course of my research, I interrogated the economic foundations of the Niger Delta (**Aghalino, 2004; Aghalino, 2006**). Ironically, it is generally assumed that the exploitation of the peoples of the Niger Delta and the devastation of their environment started when crude oil was discovered in commercial quantity in the area by Royal Dutch Shell in 1956. Evidence distilled from our studies is that Europe's plunder of the Delta, dates much further to 1444, when the Portuguese adventurer and former tax collector, Lancarote de Freitas, sailed to the West African coast and stole 235 men and women whom he later sold as slaves (Dike, 1956; Cookey, 1974 and Ofonagoro, 1979). Freitas's trip partly triggered the Atlantic slave trade before it was displaced by the trade in palm oil in the 1840s. But the pattern of trade remained unchanged from the Niger Delta to Europe and back. Thus, it is apposite to state that palm oil production and its sale, provided the initial contested site of conflict that was predicated on trade and control of the sylvan products in the Niger Delta (**Aghalino, 2000**). The oil palm is an indigenous plant not only to the people of the Niger Delta region of Nigeria but also to all the people of tropical Africa.

Before the establishment of British colonial rule in the region, we noted that the people within the Niger Delta region had established an economic system which revolved, to a large extent, around the oil palm. The people had an economic system which made adequate provisions for their needs and their immediate neighbours. When the British finally penetrated the hinterland of the Niger Delta, the exploitation of oil palm was paramount in her imperial motives. Of all the principal export commodities during the colonial period, palm oil and palm kernel have the longest histories being some of the earliest commodities exported from present-day Nigeria. Palm produce became important in the second half of the 19th century with the abolition of the slave trade, the inauguration of the Industrial Revolution, and the development of the railway which required palm oil as a lubricant. (Helleiner, 1966). The flourishing trade in palm oil gave rise to powerful trading states and strong kings with entrepreneurial capacity and sagacity, such as King Jaja of

Opobo and Nana of Itsekiri, who created and managed intricate and flourishing local and international business outfits (Ekundare, 1973; Ikime, 1977 and Ofonagoro, 1978). The relationship between the merchant princes of the Niger Delta and European merchants was convivial until the greed of the Europeans took the better part of them when they insisted on eliminating the middlemen to trade directly with the local producers in the hinterland (Dike, 1956).

The local traders resisted the entry of foreigners into the hinterland to take over direct control of the trade (**Aghalino, 2000**). The insistence of Niger Delta middlemen, epitomised by Jaja of Opopo and Nana of Itsekiri on maintaining their independence and control of the hinterland trade, in no time, brought the people of the region into direct confrontation. Consequently, for his 'impudence' in his quest for resource control, Jaja was deposed and exiled to the West Indies in 1887 (Alagoa, 1980, pp. 250-261). Nana suffered a similar fate when his trade headquarters in Ebrohimi was bombarded by the British and looted (Ikime, 1968). What to note is that with the intimidation of the local entrepreneurs through *Pax Britannica*, the ground was set to maximally exploit the resources of the region. From the foregoing, it is well established in our studies that the quest for resource control is not a recent phenomenon. Again, taking hostages for ransom and negotiation has historical antecedence and we adequately interrogated the same in our research endeavours (**Aghalino, 2010c**). Over time, the colonial traders came to terms with the fact that violence and intimidation of the people would undermine trade and by 1893, there was a radical shift from conflict to concord as reflected by the need to recognise the locals in the trade and for them to be beneficiaries in the distribution of profit.

From 1910, the colonial administration began direct involvement in the oil palm industry in the region as government policy started to unfold. British economic policy towards the oil palm industry in the Niger Delta was influenced not only by the general agricultural policy of Britain in what was later dubbed Nigeria but also its overall goals and motivations for occupying Nigeria in general. Central to these was maximally exploiting the

natural and human resources of Nigeria for the express purpose of securing profitable trade in the world market (Hopkins, 1973). It was, perhaps, this motive that influenced the British colonial administration to place the exploitation of cash crops such as oil palm, cocoa, cotton, groundnut and rubber, the topmost priority in Nigeria (Crowder, 1968). The colonial government believed in achieving the development of cash crops, not by radically destroying and/or altering the people's existing indigenous production techniques, but through the gradual modification of such (Usoro, 1974 and **Aghalino, 2000**, p.21). The modifications were to be effected in various ways. First, the colonial government tried to make available to the local farmers the kinds of seedlings known to increase optimum yield. Secondly, the colonial government sought to also improve the quality of the cash crops produced by the people.

The initiative for the modernisation of the oil palm industry came from Sir William Lever, of Lever Brothers Ltd., who suggested the grants or concession of land to commercial firms for the establishment of palm plantations (Nworah, 1972, pp.248-264). However, this proposal was rejected by the colonial government as well as the home government and the commercial firms of the United Africa Company (UAC), and in particular, John Holt. Similarly, British public opinion led by Morel, was vociferously opposed to the scheme (Buel, 1928). It was argued that the plantation system would disrupt the traditional land tenure system, which could lead to violent outbursts and protests by Nigerians who would be deprived of their land (Hancock, 1942). In addition, the granting of freehold land to European firms would cause litigation and 'endless legal stress for the colonial authorities' (Meredith, 1984, p.311). Moreover, in the larger West Africa where Nigeria belonged, it was not certain that European-owned oil palm plantations could be profitable without permanent government protection (Hopkins, 1973 and Fieldhouse, 1978). Opposition to the plantation initiative was also expressed by several Nigerian nationalists such as C. C. Adeniyi Jones and Julius Ojo-Cole and they urged the nascent Nigerian government to turn to Nigerian farmers to develop the oil palm industry (Julius, 1928). But in the face of mounting

pressure from several interest groups, the Secretary of State for the colonies set up a committee in 1923 to study the Nigerian palm sector and make recommendations for its improvement. After an intensive survey of the industry, the Committee supported the introduction of the plantation scheme and improvement of the palm groves (Forde, 1941).

Mr. Vice Chancellor, for most of the period under review, Nigeria held centre stage as one of the largest producers and exporters of palm oil, accounting for more than 40 per cent of global output in the 1950s. At the time of the country's independence from British colonial rule in 1960, palm oil contributed 82 per cent of national export revenue (<https://www.vanguardngr.com/2012/04/the-nig>; Ekundare, 1973; Hopkins, 1975 and Njoku, 2019). However, the oil boom of the mid-seventies and the subsequent decline of farming proved catastrophic to the sector. By the end of the twentieth century, Nigerian palm oil harvest had dwindled. Currently, 80 per cent of palm oil production comes from scattered smallholdings spread over an estimated 1.6 million hectares of land- no thanks to the intensification of the commercial exploitation of crude oil which effectively discouraged serious and further investment in this sector (<https://www.vanguardngr.com/2012/04/the-nig>). Vice Chancellor, sir, our copious analysis of the palm oil industry is instructive for us because, as would be shown shortly, the history of the Niger Delta has been coloured by the lure of oils (Aghalino & Aboyeji, 2021).

### **Anatomy of Sweet Crude**

As *Homo Historicus*, we are always guided by the need to take a chronological view of the past and we also shy away from monocausal explanation. Developments in the crude oil industry which are toxic, malodorous and odoriferous as the Devil's excreta took their roots from the policies distilled from our colonial past. Thus, we synthesised our research taking cognisance of the enduring loop of the dialectics of oils. This explains why we had to historicise the crude oil industry (Aghalino, 2011). The initiative to start oil exploration resided exclusively with private British oil ventures who set out to

discover the proverbial oil Spindletop. Documentation of the existence of minerals in Nigeria can be traced back to 1903 when the Mineral Survey Company, pioneered mineralogical studies of the country. Oil exploration started in Nigeria in 1908 when the Nigerian Bitumen Company (NBC), was granted a license to exploit the bitumen deposits which were traced from the present day Ondo State (Steyn, 2009 and Azaiki, 2009, p.85).

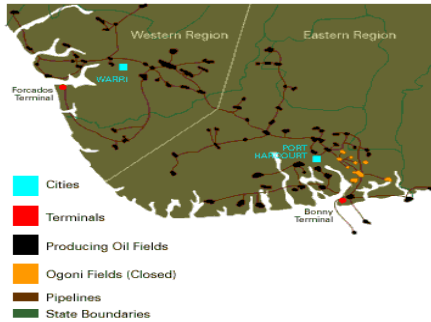
However, after drilling 15 boreholes in a period of two years (1908 - 1910), the company stopped operation because it failed to make any commercial discovery. Even though the Nigerian Bitumen company never managed to set up commercial operations in Nigeria, its Chairman, Bergheim, made a lasting contribution to the colonial oil industry through his involvement in the development of oil legislation (Steyn, 2009, p.13).

However, in 1937, Shell D. Arcy (the forerunner of Shell) came into Nigeria and obtained a concession covering the entire land area of the country. This company operated for a long time in Nigeria under the Mineral Ordinance No. 17 of 1914 and its subsequent amendments of 1925 and 1950. The amendment allowed only companies registered in Britain or any of its protectorates, the right to prospect for oil in Nigeria and further provided that the principal officers of such companies must be British subjects. Shell D. Arcy carried out an initial geological survey around Owerri resulting in the drilling of seven core holes in 1939 (**Aghalino, 2011**; Umejesi & Akpan, 2013). The activities of Shell were interrupted by the Second World War (1939-1945) and it was not until 1946 that Shell-BP Petroleum Development Company of Nigeria Limited concentrated its exploration efforts in the Niger Delta area of the country. In 1956, oil was first discovered in commercial quantity by the Anglo-Dutch group, Shell D'Arcy in Oloibiri, in what is now Bayelsa State. In 1958, Nigeria became an oil-exporting country. At its current peak production, Nigeria exports about 1.388.260 million barrels of crude oil per day (<https://www.ceicdata.com/en/indicator/nigeria>).

Vice Chancellor, sir, the point to note is that the history of the oil industry in Nigeria is long drawn (**Aghalino, 2009**). Exploration and exploitation of oil were within the domain of the

large integrated oil companies, who had the financial resources to engage in wild cat search and find oil. This dominance has not diminished after the government obtained majority shares in all the oil companies active in Nigeria in the 1970s. This state of affairs ensured that Nigerian investors had limited opportunities to directly participate in the industry until the 1990s, when the government deliberately opened up the industry to smaller and local players. With the enactment of the Local Content Act and Petroleum Industry Act, the oil industry is still an enclave economy (Federal Republic of Nigeria, Nigeria Oil and Gas Content Act, 2010; Federal Republic of Nigeria, Petroleum Industry Act, 2021; Ekeinde, Dosunmu and Okujagu, 2022).

**Figure 1:** Map of the Niger Delta showing oil fields, pipelines and terminals



**Source:**<https://www.waado.org/NigerDelta/maps/oilfields.htm>

As shown in Figure 1, Nigeria now has a vast oil infrastructure located onshore and offshore comprising three hundred oil fields, roughly 6,000 wells 7,000 kilometres of pipelines, ten export terminals, 275 flow stations, ten gas plants, four refineries and a massive liquefied natural gas (LNG) sector. Nigeria finds it difficult to meet its Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) crude oil production quota of 1.5 million barrels per day due in part to the fact that currently close to 2.1 million barrels per day are deferred due to a conspiracy of interrelated factors prominent of which is the quantum of oil amounting to well over 100,000 barrels per day stolen through

illegal bunkering (Naanen and Tolani, 2014 and **Aghalino, 2023**). Nigeria lost N6.4 trillion in five years to deferred crude oil production as disclosed by the Nigeria Extractive Industry Transparency Initiative, (NEITI) Annual Oil and Gas Industry Report for 2016 through 2020, (<https://www.dataphyte.com/latest-reports/extra>). The crisis in the region has taken a life of its own. It is currently a swamp of insurgency and paradoxically, a swamp full of dollars (International Crisis Group, 2006 and Peel, 2010). More importantly, most communities in the Niger Delta are confronted with all manner of internal conflicts, violence, youth restiveness and vandalisation of oil industry infrastructure. Understandably, the grievances of the people in the region are propelled by several factors as will be shown shortly.

### **The Devil's Excreta and the Swamp of Insurgency**

Mr. Vice Chancellor, oil exploration and production have contributed to the economic development of Nigeria. There is consensus in the fact that the contemporary fiscal existence of Nigeria is predicated on the accruals from the sale of sweet crude. Nigeria's economy and budgets have been largely supported by incomes and revenues generated from the petroleum industry since the early 1970s. Statistics for the first quarter of 2023 show that the Nigerian oil sector contributed to about 9% of the entire GDP of the nation (Ibrahim, 2023). But accompanying these practical contributions has been the negative externalities that the people of the oil-bearing enclave of the Niger Delta had to contend with. For the people of the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, the discovery of oil in their region is a paradox. While it could be conceded that sweet crude and black gold have engendered massive revenue inflow for the Nigerian state, for the people of the oil-bearing enclave, oil is a curse; at best, it is hemlock. It is more of the devil's excreta with attendant pungent and odoriferous effects, which at a time, made the region a swamp of insurgency (Watts; 2007; Ukiwo, 2007; Obi, 2010 and Ukeje, 2011). The oil industry in the Niger Delta has the capacity for generating both tremendous wealth and intense environmental transformation and has served as a potent metaphor for the energies and contradictions of development. As



in the case of Norway and the United Arab Emirates, revenue from crude oil has been used to transform these countries and funds were divested and Sovereign Wealth Fund put in place for the future (Elwerfelli and Benhin, 2018). But for the case of Nigeria, it is more of a resource curse and affliction of the Dutch Disease. In our interrogation of the issues in contention in the crude oil business, we established the fact that the appellation of oil as sweet and crude is apt (**Aghalino, 2001a**). When oil was struck in commercial quantity in Oloibiri in 1956, the people bubbled with joy and beamed with expectations of the possible transformation of their environment; provision of jobs, and the establishment of cottage industries. This ray of optimism evaporated when the environmental impact of the oil industry began to dawn on the people. The environmental costs of oil exploration are said to be inevitable, but the point to note is that the wanton degradation and negligence of the environment in the course of oil production is a colonial legacy. From the beginning, exploratory activities harmed the natural environment. Steyn, (2009, pp. 253-254) reported that Frank Drader, Nigerian Bitumen's field manager, in a letter to his wife in 1909, explained the environmental consequences of oil discovery from No. 5 Well located in Lekki Lagoon, which when initially tapped, flowed at a rate of 2000 barrels a day. Drader painted the gory picture of how ...' the lagoon is at present all covered with oil... and there was so much oil at our wharf that the Doctor got all covered last night when he went swimming... If, at the beginning of the oil exploration in Nigeria, this environmental nightmare was noticeable, one can then imagine the environmental tragedy or ecocide in the Niger Delta, being the ground zero of crude business.

While there is some ambiguity in Nigeria's gas reserves, it is agreed that Nigeria is a gas-rich province, and in some quarters, it is described as a gas province with little oil in it (Adegbugbu, 2006 and **Aghalino, 2010**). It is estimated that gas reserves in Nigeria will last over 100 years (as against oil 40 years) and are expected to overtake crude oil as a major foreign exchange earner in the future (EIA, independent statistics and

analysis of the US Energy Information Administration Nigeria Analysis <http://www.eia.doe.gov/countries/cab.cfm?fips=NI>).

Vice Chancellor, sir, in a nation where a vast majority depend on firewood for cooking, it is scandalous that the nation is on the enviable ladder of infamy in the quantum of associated gas that is routinely flared despite the plethora of legislation and legal framework against this despicable practice. In 2022 alone, according to Nigeria Gas Flare Tracker, a Satellite-based technology created by Nigeria Oil Spill Detection and Response Agency, Nigeria flared about 134.5 billion standard cubic feet of gas, which is equivalent to 13,000 megawatts of electricity (<https://www.businessday.ng/energy/oilandgas/articles>). Available evidence suggests gas flaring has become a major ecological problem in the region that it has instigated agitation from the oil-bearing enclave of the Niger Delta (**Aghalino, 2010a**). Perhaps more serious than the colossal waste in the environmental impact of gas flaring by rendering the land unsuitable for cultivation, is the charring of the mangrove and rainforest vegetation of the Niger Delta. This has inevitably led to the loss of numerous economically and botanically valuable plants. It is puzzling that despite the unequivocal pursuit, at least on paper, as attested to by being party to major international environmental agreements such as the convention on biodiversity, climate change, and ozone layer protection among others, Nigeria still allow gas flaring.

Environment pollution, caused mainly by oil spillages and indiscriminate disposal of oil industry waste and cuttings, is commonplace in the region. Indeed, since the oil majors have been prospecting for oil in the Niger Delta, they have not only radically disrupted the ecological balance of the area but have also, through negligence and cynical indifference, orchestrated a vicious ecological war and there has not been a concerted effort towards environmental remediation (**Aghalino and Omonigho, 2020**). This has continued despite the fact that globally, environmental issues are in the front burners as attested to by the recent climate change summit, COP 28 in Dubai (Oyedeji, 2023).

Our field investigation has shown that the pollution caused by oil spillage does not end with the mopping up of the spilt oil (**Aghalino** and Eyinla, 2009). It is now known that health risk is not averted by abstinence from meat and fish killed by spilt oil. Some of the fishes and animals that escape instant death from pollution are known to have taken in some of the toxic substances, which in turn get into human beings that eat them. This will in turn cause infections in man coupled with other side effects in the form of genetic mutations (**Aghalino, 2012**). As shall be demonstrated shortly, the deleterious effects of the oil industry are a major catalyst for the anti-oil protests in the region.

It is normal to expect that the ecological and economic consequences of petroleum development would have multiplier effects on the social and cultural life of the people in the oil-producing communities (**Aghalino: 2010b**). Farmers are forced to turn to other occupations as a result of the degradation of their land. Farmers and fishermen who are unable to adjust usually migrate to nearby urban centres such as Warri, Eket, Port-Harcourt and Ughelli in search of greener pastures. Such movements imply that the problem of unemployment is worsened in the aforementioned urban centres. Deprived of a means of livelihood, large numbers of youths with nothing to sell but their labour power have become key elements in the resistance to the activities of the multinational oil corporations in the Niger Delta (**Aghalino, 2008**). The frustration-aggression nexus was replicated in the Niger Delta as the despoliation of the environment and the absence of alternative means of livelihood created a vent for one form of agitation over the other. But for now, Mr. Vice Chancellor, it may be helpful to dissect, without the Doctor's scalpel, but with the historian's craft, the anatomy of anti-oil protests in the Niger Delta.

### **Synopsis of Anti-oil Protests in the Niger Delta**

Vice Chancellor, sir, opinion is divided on the causes and nature of anti-oil protests in the Niger Delta. Various scholars have approached the issue based on their idiosyncrasies, perception of reality and ideological leaning (Naanen, 1995;

Frynas, 1998; Human Rights Watch, 1999 and Amnesty International, 2015 and Lugard, 2016) while it could be taken for granted that these various positions have sharpened our grasp of the subject matter, the point must be made that a uni-dimensional or mono-causal explanation of reality is at variance with historical events because, this could blur the intricacies, complexities as well as dialectal inter-play of the various issues at stake. This explains our intersection with past and present in challenging the conventional rule of thumb approach in the study of the oil question in the Niger Delta. More so, our analysis here is hinged on the fact that the conflict in the region is intertwined with the history of the region- a history that has oily colouration and it is strewn with resistance and protest over property rights (**Aghalino, 2011**). At the onset of the oil industry in Nigeria, the people of the Niger Delta bubbled with expectations; they were highly enthused by the prospect of the transformation of their region. Their hope was robust, as this was ignited by promises of gainful employment, provision of basic amenities, better quality of life and assurance of establishment of cottage industries that would employ their sons and daughters. To be sure, the oil industry made a dozen barrels of promises and plans were in the pipelines; raising the expectation of the people to an unprecedented height- expectations that were denominated in 'standard cubic feet'! In our appraisal of the causative factors, we found that the avowed optimism explains the initial warm and convivial disposition of the people of the region to the oil firms (**Aghalino, 2011**). Without the prospect of the transformation of their lives, the people of the oil-rich Niger Delta could not have given such unfettered reception to the oil industry, having earlier been hoodwinked by the colonial state.

With time, the people discovered to their chagrin that, the operators of the industry were not committed to fulfilling the promises made to the people. Over time, there has been an explosion in the number of youths who have obtained higher education, who, as it were, feel they should be absorbed as pledged by the oil firms and the Federal Government. The local elite seems not to have access to plump jobs in the oil industry; rather, it is alleged that the major ethnic groups appear to have

hijacked the oil industry. Perception may not be reality but optics may be convincing, hence, youths in the region believed that the revenue from the region has been used to transform such cities like Lagos, Abuja, Kaduna and Kano. When confronted with the quantum of the institutional intervention of the federal government and the semblance of corporate social responsibility of the oil firms, their opinion of negligence is not moderated (**Aghalino, 2009 a**).

A corollary to the above is the issue of gross poverty in the Niger Delta. Despite the vast oil wealth of the region, the people are desperately poor and the region is generally underdeveloped. It can be argued that poverty is a general phenomenon in Nigeria. This is even though as of 2007, Nigeria and the oil companies had extracted about 100 billion barrels of oil from the Niger Delta since oil was discovered in commercial quantity at Olobiri in 1956 (Federal Republic of Nigeria: Report of the Niger Delta Technical Committee, 2008, p.102). Nevertheless, when viewed from the perspective of the stupendous and humongous wealth derived from the region, which some authorities extrapolated to be about US\$ 600 billion, it is paradoxical that poverty is widespread- a situation that contrasts sharply with developments in other oil-bearing nations in the Middle East (**Aghalino, 2012b**). The poverty level of the people is compounded by the high cost of living caused partly by the presence of highly paid oil workers living near poor folks in the oil-bearing enclaves. The congruence and paradox of wealth and poverty closely typify a tale of two cities or what our revered Ajiboye (2001), in another context, referred to as the paradox of closeness and distance.

Mr. Vice Chancellor, in the course of our research, we interrogated the issue of derivation as a revenue allocation formula (**Aghalino and Okolie, 2014**). Derivation means that a fixed proportion of the revenue collected in a local area should be retained in that area (Suberu, 1996, pp.29-31). For the people of the Niger Delta, their grouse with the government is that a significant proportion of oil revenue should be returned to their areas based on the derivation principle. In the decade following independence, derivation played an important role in Nigeria's

fiscal federalism (Amuwo, 1998; Mbanefo, 1993; IMF, 2003). It would appear that as federal budgets were becoming increasingly dependent on oil revenue, the oil-bearing regions and later states were allocated a small proportion of locally collected revenues (**Aghalino, 2010c**).

The potential threat to the corporate existence of Nigeria as a result of the protests and agitation of the Movement for the Emancipation of the Ogoni People under the leadership of Ken Saro Wiwa and other groups in the Niger Delta must have propelled a rethink in the tinkering of the revenue allocation formula (**Aghalino, 2012<sup>a</sup>**). Thus, in the 1999 Constitution, it was conceded that 13 per cent of the Federal revenue should be distributed to the oil-bearing states based on derivation. It is relevant to add that the weight accorded the principle of derivation appears to have been determined by the interest of the factions of the ruling class.

More than anything else, the land question appears to be a sore point in the tripartite relationship between the oil-bearing communities, the oil companies and the federal government. Section 28 of the Land Use Act of 1978 (now updated in the Laws of the Federation of Nigeria (LFN), (LFN, 1990 & LFN CAP L5, 2004), effectively placed all land in the country under the control of the government. The people of the oil-bearing enclave of the Niger Delta are mere titular owners of land and water in which oil activity is taking place. The process of the entry of oil companies into the communities is also alienating. It is the government that unilaterally grants them a licence to operate. (**Aghalino, 2009<sup>b</sup>**). The Land Use Act incited land-centered conflicts among the people of the Niger Delta which led to further fragmentation of an already fragile social dynamic (Omeje, 2006, pp.42-43). With the Act, the people are essentially turned from legal inhabitants to unlawful intruders on their lands.

The land question is not a new phenomenon (**Aghalino, 2004**). The unilateral acquisition of the land of the people was seriously challenged during the colonial period and at the beginning of the crude oil business in the oil belt. For example, the Ikeduru people rose in opposition to the joint venture's exploration party headed by one H.S. Marchant in late 1948 and

rejected the government's claims to the rights over all minerals in their land. In the same vein in the Afikpo and Okigwe area, questions were asked regarding the nature of the joint venture operations through their claims to land and the size of the concession (Steyn, 2009; Umejesi & Akpan, 2013). What to note is that land is embedded with identity, social values and history (**Aghalino, 2001<sup>b</sup>**). Land-take by oil firms has eroded the security of communities, in a life-world dominated by the privatisation of resources through what Harvey (2005) terms as accumulation by dispossession (See also Kativu & Oskarsson, 2021; Das 2017).

Mr. Vice Chancellor, the long history of dispossession in the Niger Delta has also been compounded by several other extant and lop-sided oil industry-related laws geared towards emasculating the people in the oil-bearing enclave and by extension, served to stoke the embers of conflict in the region. To be sure, most of the obnoxious laws had their roots during the colonial period (**Aghalino, 2002**). One begins to wonder why successive leaders in post-colonial Nigeria resuscitated the colonial laws and dressed them in new garb. Most of the laws were copied and regurgitated with little or no consideration for the interest of the people. As early as 1945, oil was securitised by the colonial state by passing the Mineral Ordinance which vested mineral rights in the Crown. The Nigerian state has replicated and added more obnoxious laws that have been at the centre of agitations in the Niger Delta. It is gratifying to note that recently, some of these laws have been repealed, reworked and consolidated under the Petroleum Industry Act. (Petroleum Industry Act, 2021).

The point must be made that the wave of community unrest and protests, which increased in the 1990s at the behest of the Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP) and later snowballed to all parts of the Niger Delta, are clear manifestations of discontentment with the operations of the oil firms as well as Federal Government negligence of the oil-bearing enclaves (**Aghalino, 2017**). The recourse to protests and disruption of oil industry operations would seem to explain the hopelessness of seeking redress through litigation. The agitation

in the region has been hijacked by the youths and politicians and their demands have become fluid thereby metamorphosing from genuine cause to outright commerce and, in some instances, disguised criminality.

### **Petro-Insurgency in the Niger Delta**

Mr. Vice Chancellor, sir, from the foregoing historical inquest into the challenge of restiveness in the Niger Delta, the movement for self-determination and the quest for resource control in the oil-bearing belt predated the advent of crude oil. What is significant is that the framing of demands and issues in contention have mutated and changed over time. Nigeria's return to democratic rule in 1999, raised expectations within the Niger Delta because it was hoped that a new basis would be set towards the demilitarisation of the region and that the elected leaders would do better to address the grievances of the people. At the same time, some elements of the youth long exposed to military repression, had become socialised into believing that non-violent protests were not of much use, as the state and oil companies have always ignored peaceful demands and resorted to repression when confronted with demands for compensation, local participation in the oil industry and jobs placement. For these groups and their co-travellers, violence was perceived as a legitimate weapon when peaceful protests fell on deaf ears.

Vice-Chancellor, sir, unlike in the 1980s or 1990s, a substantial number of Delta youths are willing and able to directly confront federal and state security forces. A vast cache of sophisticated arms is skillfully deployed in the environment of a mangrove creek. The Nigerian security forces were overstretched as there were massive pipeline breaks, vandalism and outright sabotage of oil installations. The conflict in the region became so whimsical, as it took on a life of its own. There were alliances and counter-alliances by militant groups claiming to be championing the cause of the Niger Delta. As the conflict became so complex, it metamorphosed into complex economics of conflict (Ikelegbe, 2005<sup>a</sup>) as epitomised by the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), which combined lethal attacks and sabotage of oil



installations with the effective use of global media to publicise its campaigns of 'fighting for the control of oil revenues by indigenes of the Niger Delta' (Kulungu, 2021 and Courson, 2009). To show that the militants were serious and had garnered some sophistication, on 11<sup>th</sup> January, 2006, a Shell Petroleum Development Company's (SPDC) oil field located about 20 kilometres offshore was attacked, damaged and four expatriates kidnapped by militants after a fierce gun duel with the military guarding the oil-field. The dust had barely settled when, on Saturday, 15<sup>th</sup> January, 2006, MEND militants attacked and destroyed one flow station and two military houseboats belonging to SPDC in Benisede, Bayelsa State (**Aghalino, 2017**).

Mr. Vice Chancellor, the above was the doomsday economic situation for Nigeria when President Umar Yar'Adua assumed office on 29<sup>th</sup> May, 2007 as the President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria and this offered fresh initiatives for the resolution of the Niger Delta crisis. The attack on Bonga, a ₦43.6 billion floating, production, storage and offloading vessel (FPSOV) and deepwater sub-sea facility, 120 kilometres off the coast and the attack on Atlas Cove woke the government to the frightening dimension of the crisis and the need to urgently tame the militants (**Aghalino, 2020**). When within twenty-four hours of the Bonga attack, a major oil pipeline near Escravos in Delta State, belonging to Chevron, was also hit by the rampaging militants, it was clear that the conflict had gone beyond the elbow, with dire consequences (Watkin, 2008 and Petroleum Africa, 2008).

As the crisis deepened, so also have crime and lawlessness. Statistics compiled by the International Maritime Bureau for 2008 show 40 reported incidents of piracy in the Delta including 27 vessels boarded, five hijackings and 39 crew members kidnapped. This situation threatened to place Nigerian waters second only to Somalia as the world's most dangerous. When in January 2009, gunmen attacked the M.T. Meredith, a tanker carrying 4,000 tons of diesel fuel, it was clear to the Nigerian state that the region was becoming the next Gulf (Omotola, 2006). The Bonga attack coupled with these suggests

that pirates have an increasing ocean-going ability to threaten maritime energy assets. When in January 2016, the Niger Delta Avengers (NDA) struck, the stage was set again for another round of militancy in the region (Niworu, 2017 and Bamidele, 2017).

Nevertheless, the insurgency of the NDA was phenomenal. This is attested to by the fact that on 10th February, 2016, the militants blew up the Bonny Soku Gas line, which carries natural gas to the Nigeria Liquefied Natural Gas Plant, and an independent power plant at Gbaran (Onuoha, 2016). Possibly in reaction to the President's warning to the group of the dire consequences for their action, the NDA launched its Operation Red Economy on 13<sup>th</sup> February 2016. What seemed to be the most enduring attack of the NDA was the blowing up of the Trans Forcados Pipeline, which transports oil, water, and associated gas from fields in the Western Delta to the 400, 000 barrels per day Forcados oil terminal, which made Shell to shut it down and declared force majeure (Abayomi, 2016). Chevron's Escravos operation was also breached when its Valve Platform at Warri was blown up. ENI and Exxon Mobil had earlier on declared "force majeure". As a further response to the gross insecurity in the region, Shell and Chevron moved their staff out of the Niger Delta. As promised by the NDA, the economy was gradually being grounded. Between January 10, 2006 and February 18, 2007, the spate of attack was virtually on a monthly basis. The activities of the militants grounded the oil industry and the government had to be proactive in measured response to the debilitating impact of the incessant attacks (**Aghalino, 2017**).

Mr. Vice Chancellor, we stated earlier that a defining characteristic of the Nigeria Delta and the crude business is the mutation and different response measures of the people to property rights and resource control. Conversely, we interrogated the resurgence and proliferation of illicit and artisanal refineries in the region (**Aghalino 2024**). Historically, the origin of illicit oil refining in Nigeria is intrinsically linked with developments during the Nigerian Civil War, 1967-1970 (Korie, 2003). In the course of the war, the energy need of the defunct state of Biafra was high. In order, therefore, to serve the war-time energy and other emerging needs, the process of local refining of crude oil

into low-quality fuels was adopted by the people (Naanen & Tolani, 2014). The point to be made is that the ability to refine fuel was one of the technological innovations that kept Biafran's dream while it lasted (<https://pressbooks.pub/firoze/chapter/the-bust-refineries-of-th>). However, after the collapse of Biafra, the absence of the war-time exigencies, and the relatively cheap price of fuel following the oil boom of the early 1970s, the local crude oil processing industry and the economy declined and the need and practice of local distillation of crude oil into fuel fizzled out.

As it were, a new window of unorthodox business emerged in the form of oil theft otherwise known as 'oil bunkering'. Initial cases of bunkering were dominated by small-scale theft of refined petroleum products for domestic use and sale in local black markets. It later evolved into acts of oil pipeline vandalism by local youths to in part, call oil stakeholders' attention to their plights arising from oil spills and environmental degradation, and to compel oil companies to pay compensation to affected communities (**Aghalino, 2005**). Thus, by the 1980s, oil bunkering had become a social and serious economic problem in the Niger Delta and in the Nigerian oil industry. Nevertheless, opinion is divided on the issue of crude stealing and bunkering by the locals in the Niger Delta. To some, stealing of crude oil is not a crime or deviant behaviour; instead, it occurs due to contestation over ownership and benefit-sharing. To the people, stealing crude is an everyday means for the weak to subsist and challenge the legitimacy of the regulatory agencies in the struggle for recognition. Thus, different perceptions blur the lines between the legality and illegality of crude stealing (Yang and Chen, 2023). But for the government that depends on revenue accruals from the sale of crude, stealing crude is an economic crime, and in the extreme, it was akin to subversion and treasonable felony.

Mr. Vice Chancellor, once the practice of illegal bunkering took off, the informal industry grew phenomenally, culminating in the reported destruction of "600 illegal refineries" in Ogoni alone by the Joint Task Force (JTF), in December 2009" (Champion Newspaper, 2009), and the consequent

surrender of “800 illegal refinery operators” in the area in March 2010 (The Vanguard, 2010). In point of fact, as noted by Kadafa (2012), illicit oil value chains are better organised and more profitable in more recent times than it was in the past. For instance, it is revealed that more numbers and increased capacity carrying camps and refineries are being built. It is equally estimated that in 2017, there was a radical change in the total supply chain earnings from the illicit oil refinery business when it increased by twenty-four times to £578.5 million (<https://www.stakeholdersdemocracy.org/moremoneyproblems/>). Notwithstanding, the illegal industry remains characterised by poor working conditions that lead to environmental pollution, wanton loss of lives and properties as well as health hazards. Just like youth restiveness and insurgency in the Niger Delta, a number of interrelated factors have conspired to accentuate the preponderance of illicit refineries in the region. The drivers are intricately interwoven with the traditional causes of unrest in the oil-bearing of the Niger Delta.

### **The Conundrum of Illicit Oil Refineries in the Niger Delta**

The conundrum and the growing prevalence of illicit oil refining sites in the Niger Delta can be situated within the context of several interrelated and often overlapping factors as stated earlier. Complex brews of historical, environmental, socio-economic and political factors are responsible for the rise and intensification of illicit oil refineries in the Niger Delta. For one, the Niger Delta is sufficiently known for its unique environmental characteristics. Geographically, the coastal areas of the Delta are made up of swampy mangrove forests while the hinterland areas consist of thick rainforests. The region is epitomised by the difficult terrain of creeks, rivers, estuaries and forests (Uyigüe and Agho, 2007). These environmental features of the region have understandably, served dual functions in the thriving illicit business of local refining of crude oil in the area.

First, even though crude oil is produced in the Niger Delta, the difficulty in transporting the by-products such as fuel to the hinterlands across the creeks makes the cost astronomically high, which has also made fuel extremely

expensive in the hinterland in the Niger Delta. Hence, local refineries regardless of the dangers involved may have been seen as an altruistic quick intervention while making a humongous amount of money in the process (**Aghalino, 2022**). Secondly, the challenging terrain of the Niger Delta provides opportunities as safe-haven for local oil crooks. This explains to a reasonable extent why the war by the Nigerian state against this nefarious activity, has remained seemingly intractable.

The discovery and development of the petroleum industry accompanied by the land-take phenomenon in the region has compounded access to land, especially for economic activities. Although the oil companies operating in the region have claimed that their use of land in the Niger Delta is limited (Frynas, 2000), it is essential to note that the narrative on the true picture of land use in the Niger Delta indicates that the value of land held by oil companies operating in the area is enormous for various oil production activities. For instance, a minimum of 7.7 hectares of land is required to site an oil well and a helicopter landing pad in the Niger Delta region (Emuedo and Abam, 2015). The impact of land alienation for petroleum activities in the Niger Delta would be clearer when considered from the perspective that the region today harbours a massive oil infrastructure consisting of 606 oil fields, 6,284 wells, over 7,000km pipelines, 10 export terminals, 275 flow stations, 10 gas plants, 3 refineries and a massive liquefied natural gas plant (NDDC, 2006).

There is also the problem of land and water loss to oil spills. Oil spillages are common occurrences in the Niger Delta. When there is a spill, it releases quantum of crude oil with its harmful content into the environment be it land or water and render them contaminated, barren and unfit for traditional economic activities of farming and fishing (**Aghalino, 2006**). As should be expected, the local farmers and fishermen are forced to abandon the polluted land and water, which in most cases, may still have oil flowing on it for a long time after the spill has occurred. Consequently, it is understandable that for communities and people that depend on the environment for traditional livelihoods of fishing and farming, the quantum of

land-take and massive environmental damage through oil exploration and exploitation means dislocation of the local economies, increased poverty and destitution in these communities, leading to an intensified search for alternative means of survival, which to some segments of the local population would mean, engagement in the local crude refining of oil, which is later sold for money as a coping strategy.

It is not out of place to say that some of the actors in the illicit refining act must have interpreted their actions as a response to further the quest for control of the oil resource. A case in point is the position which was actively canvassed by Alhaji Asari Dokubo, who was alleged to be actively involved in illegal oil bunkering and local crude oil processing to the extent that the by-product was named 'Asari fuel' (**Aghalino, 2021**). The argument by Asari was that if the people of Zamfara and other parts of Nigeria can exploit their solid minerals, the people of the Niger Delta can as well do the same. While the position of Asari Dokubo on property right may be unassailable, a legitimate agitation for resource control must be within the dictate of law in order not to undermine the sovereignty of the nation. Nonetheless, there has been a widespread view by the agitators that in the absence of having adequate share of the proceeds from the sale of petroleum resources of the region, illegal bunkering and refining are forms of resource control by other means.

We identified the high rate of unemployment in the Niger Delta, especially among the youths, as one of the root causes of illegal bunkering and artisanal refining in the region (**Aghalino, 2022**). The region records some of the highest rates of unemployment in the country. In 2020, according to Nairametrics report generated from the National Bureau of Statistics, the south-south region, which is also the oil-bearing belt has 37 per cent unemployment rate (<https://nairametrics.com/2020/08/16/south-south-states-lead-in-nigerian-unemployment/>). This is unexpected because the oil industry is not a high-emplying sector. As it were, even the little that they engage, are usually not from the host communities because the employments are skills and professionally driven, which the

operators of the oil industry claim most of the local people do not have to make them employable. This claim cannot stand the test of rigorous scrutiny because the region now has a crop of well-educated youths, but due to nepotism and the skewed nature of employment in the sector, the people are hardly considered for job placement. Joblessness, therefore, has become a viable excuse for youths to indulge in illicit businesses of illegal bunkering and refining just to eke out a living, and as a coping strategy.

Vice Chancellor, sir, the psychological trauma occasioned by the paradox of affluence and want, usually generates feelings of resentment and animosity against the oil majors. The impact of this is that for most players in the local illicit oil refining business, the engagement is not seen as a criminal activity, but a self-help initiative, a 'legitimate' and repossessing economic undertaking deriving from the resources of their land, which has been corruptly and forcefully taken over by 'strangers'. This brings to the fore the role of official corruption in the exacerbation of the anger of neglect in the oil-producing communities in the Niger Delta. Over the years, corruption has engendered abandoned development projects in several communities in the region. The Niger Delta region has been a veritable graveyard of abandoned and failed contracts of government and oil companies' development projects largely due to corrupt practices. As far as the people are concerned, the attacks on them by the government through the use of Joint Task Force (JTF) and other law enforcement agencies, is a criminalisation of their enterprise. They claim that one cannot steal what belongs to him, whereas the endemic and pathological corruption of Nigerian leaders is accommodated in official circles.

The vulnerability of oil installations is another case in point in the prevailing operations of illicit refineries in the Niger Delta. Oil extraction precedes oil refining. Sabotage is performed when pipelines are vandalised to extract crude oil for illegal refineries. This is usually possible in the Niger Delta because oil installations, especially pipelines, are not adequately protected, hence their vulnerability to attack and other forms of third-party interference. This is in addition to the inadequate

surveillance and policing of the pipelines that have made the country lose about \$1 billion in revenue to pipeline vandals and thieves in the first quarter of 2022 (<https://www.zawya.com/en/business/energy/nigeria-to-adopt>).The open surface laying of pipelines is a general unsustainable practice by the oil with its attendant environmental impact and amenability to hot tapping. While it could be conceded that the major oil firms have attempted to redress this malaise, there are strong indications that the practice of exposing highly inflammable pipelines is predominant in parts of the Niger Delta as attested to by the increase in cases of oil theft through illegal bunkering. The absence of the right technology to remotely monitor crude oil pipelines in Nigeria as obtainable in Saudi Arabia through Aramco's use of fibre optic pipeline leak detection technology (<https://www.apsensing.com>) tends to give easy access to crude oil thieves and pipeline vandals, and by extension, the operators of illegal refineries.

Again, the challenge of the riverine dwellers in the Niger Delta is that of double jeopardy. In the 1990s, the Nigeria National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC) introduced floating fuel stations to the riverine communities but the laudable initiative has been abandoned, due in part to corruption and lack of political will on the part of the government to continue with the initiative. In the absence of functional government and private outlets for dispensing petroleum products, the people had no choice but to engage in self help through illicit production of fuel. The point to note is that if there is proper oil industry governance, accountability and clearly defined acceptable ownership rights, the resort to self-help in the stealing of our national asset would have been kept at arm's length.

### **Placebos as Medicine**

Mr. Vice Chancellor, it is important to note that successive administrations in Nigeria right from the colonial period have attempted to nip the crude reality of oily frictions in the Niger Delta in the bud. In our cost-benefit analysis of sweet crude in the region, we paid adequate attention to government interventions. We noted earlier that the problem of the Niger Delta and its peculiar terrain engaged the attention of the



colonial state. This, as it were, necessitated the setting up of the Sir Henry Willinks Commission to recommend the best strategies for the development of a region that boasts of, perhaps, the most difficult terrain in Africa (The Henry Willinks Commission, 1958). When it turned in its report in 1958, it recommended that the Niger Delta deserved special attention and should be made a Special Area for development. Based on the Commission's report, the Federal Government established the Niger Delta Development Board (NDDDB) in 1960 to cater for the unique developmental needs of the area.

Vice Chancellor, sir, it was because of the clear manifestation of the potential threat to national security by anti-oil protesters that some serious attention was paid to the Niger Delta question. In 1986, the 1.5 per cent fund was put in place under the allocation of revenue (federation accounts). To disburse this fund, the Oil Mineral Producing Areas Development Fund Committee was set up. The Committee could not do much because its activities were halted by a Supreme Court judgment. What seems to be a genuine attempt at tackling the Niger Delta crisis was the establishment of the Oil Mineral Producing Areas Development Commission (OMPADEC). The OMPADEC was established through Decree No. 23 of 19th July 1992. This Decree raised the limit of the derivation fund to 3 percent of the federation account. Mr. Vice Chancellor, we must quickly add that the performance of OMPADEC is a subject of heated debate (Aghalino, 2002). It would appear that those who benefited from the Commission lauded its activities, while communities that failed to realise anything substantial from it poured a lot of vituperation on it. In due course, OMPADEC was restructured under the Chairmanship of Vice-Admiral Preston Omatsola before its activities were liquidated.

On the political front, it seems the Federal Government has conceded much to the people of the Niger Delta. As a plausible conciliatory offer to the Ijaw ethnic nationality, Bayelsa State was created out of the then Rivers State. This concession was also extended to the Isoko, Kwale, and Itsekiri when their yearning for a separate state crystallised in 1991 with the creation of Delta State from the then Bendel State. The

establishment of the Delta State capital at Asaba led to a plethora of protests. The then Military President, General Badamosi Babangida, was accused of favouritism because his wife, Miriam Babangida hailed from Asaba. The reality on the ground was that the inability of the Urhobos and the Itsekiri to arrive at a common ground on the location of the nascent State capital must have been used as a justification by Ibrahim Babangida when he cited the capital of the nascent State at Asaba (Danmole and **Aghalino, 1995**).

The initial efforts and interventions in the region, which did not assuage the people's conditions, slowly gave rise to tension, anger, and conflicts, and by 1999 the region was awash with thousands of abandoned projects, relics of the people's expectations. To the people of the region, these interventions are mere placebos (Kiikpoye and George, 2010). Indeed, the people had developed a strong distrust of government intentions and the people of the region started taking their destinies into their own hands. This situation has engendered what Ikelegbe (2005<sup>b</sup>) referred to as an emerging economy of conflict in the Niger Delta, which is characterised with intense, violent and bloody struggle for the appropriation of oil resources and benefits from the oil economy and a thriving market of illegal trading and smuggling of arms, crude and refined oil.

In fairness to President Obasanjo, the Niger Delta problem featured prominently in his inaugural speech on 29<sup>th</sup> May, 1999 (<https://www.aalco.int/report41session/inaugu>; National Repository of Nigeria). When he took the oath of office in May 1999, he was quite cognisant of the debilitating crisis in the Niger Delta region. This was evident in his speech when he promised to forward a bill within weeks of the inception of the administration to the National Assembly, for a law providing for 13 percent derivation to be paid to the oil-producing states of the Niger Delta to be used for ecological rehabilitation, infrastructural and other developments. Indeed, the NDDC is charged with a clear mission: 'to facilitate the rapid, even and sustainable development of the Niger Delta into a region that is economically prosperous, socially stable, ecologically regenerative and politically peaceful (**Aghalino, 2012<sup>c</sup>**).

In 2000, the President commenced the implementation of the 13 per cent derivation as enshrined in the 1999 Constitution. As part of its infrastructural development programmes, the Commission has done some works in the areas of road construction, reconstruction and construction of modern jetties, shoreline protection, canalisation and erosion control. It also includes massive efforts in rural electrification projects, water scheme renovation and construction of classrooms, dormitories/hostel blocks and hospitals/health centres. The major problem of NDDC projects is their low quality and high cost (**Aghalino, 2012<sup>b</sup>**). But just like other interventionist agencies that preceded it, successive Managing Directors and Boards of the Commission brazenly violated the Act establishing the Commission. What perhaps is not in doubt is that intentions by the government are not in short supply. The multiple knee-jerk responses and proliferation of committees are a pointer to the fact that the government is yet to get its bearing right in taming the crisis in the region. Other than the above, the administration established the Ministry of Niger Delta. The Ministry which was created in September 2008 had a twin mandate of focusing on infrastructure and youth empowerment. Indeed, the Ministry possesses great potential in assisting to address the developmental problem in the area. If history is anything to go by, there is nothing to suggest that the Ministry has done well. It remains a cesspool of corruption and political gratification.

President Yar'Adua also set up the Technical Committee on the Niger Delta headed by Ledum Mitee in September 2008 (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2008). The Committee, made up of 45 seasoned men and women with sound knowledge of the terrain of the region, was to collate past reports on the Niger Delta issue and advise the Federal Government on the way forward. The Committee assembled and reviewed over 400 reports, memoranda and other documents from local, national and international stakeholders. Based on its analysis of these reports, it presented its report in three parts comprising first: compact with stakeholders in the Niger Delta, the second part laid broad themes and roles for stakeholders in a regional transformation agenda and the third part recommended that the

Federal Government create institution and mechanisms to implement the compact and other medium-term processes. The high point of the report is the recommendation of amnesty for militants within a comprehensive demobilisation, disarmament and rehabilitation programme.

What appeared to be a revolutionary approach to bringing peace to the Niger Delta was the initiation of the amnesty programme by the Yar'Adua's administration (**Aghalino, 2012<sup>a</sup>**). To give bite to this, on 25<sup>th</sup> June, 2009, the President granted amnesty to the militants with effect from 6<sup>th</sup> August, and gave them 60 days within which to surrender their arms and renounce militancy (Federal Republic of Nigeria, Amnesty Proclamation, 2009). The programme required the militants to surrender their weapons and in return, they would receive a presidential pardon, education, training and access to a rehabilitation programme. By the expiration of the 4<sup>th</sup> October deadline, which the federal government gave the militants to disarm, virtually all the key militants had embraced the amnesty deal. The amnesty proclamation by the President must be seen as his way of stooping to conquer a complex problem that had defied all previous solutions. The thinking must have been that a peaceful environment would engender more commitment from the government and other stakeholders to provide the necessary infrastructure for the people. In working towards this, Yar'Adua showed a willingness to react with firmness and also offer compromises whenever possible. The speed with which he confronted the various attempts to undermine his resolution to grant full amnesty to the insurgents was remarkable.

We must also note, just like the previous administrations, that Yar'Adua was also willing to wield the big stick against recalcitrant militants into line. On 25<sup>th</sup> November, 2008, the government set up a special force on security in the maritime sector, and it also boosted the resources of the Joint Task Force. The Inter-Agency Maritime Security Task Force on Acts of Illegality in Nigeria's Territorial Waters was to identify all illegal activities and security breaches in the coastal waters and recommend immediate remedial actions. In May 2000, the Federal Government launched a full-scale military offensive

against the militants in the creeks (**Aghalino, 2017**). The attack on Gbaramatu by the Joint Task Force viciously decimated the community as fighter jets, warships, naval gunboats, grenades, artillery and bombs were unleashed on the people of the community. The bombardment of this community was consequent upon the kidnapping of some people and the death of soldiers sent to rescue them. It is significant to stress that the military approach was not the driving force of the Yar'Adua administration as this was sparingly used (**Aghalino, 2012<sup>a</sup>**). The amnesty programme was a master stroke as there was hardly any genuine reason for the militants not to accept it. The pocket of the renegade groups such as MEND and NDA was virtually without sympathy as the wind was taken from their sail. The untimely death of President Yar'Adua almost stalled the seamless handling of policies of the administration toward the Niger Delta. When Goodluck Jonathan was made Acting President through the doctrine of necessity, and later, President, he added life to taming the Niger Delta monster. The point of departure is that, while the amnesty programme is ongoing, there is a compelling need to adequately integrate ex-militants into the mainstream of the oil industry to give them a sense of belonging.

In our analysis of the crude oil business in the Niger Delta, we also adumbrated the government's stick approach in resolving the challenges induced by restiveness in the oil-bearing enclave. There is compelling evidence as shown from our studies that the Federal Government did not favour dialogue in this matter although government agents often feigned preference for dialogue and a peaceful resolution of the *impasse*. It is worth reiterating that the stick approach of the government to the resolution of the Niger Delta crisis merely escalated the issue. For one, the invasion of Odi was ostensibly to teach a 'lesson' to the residents of the town and serve as a warning to other militant communities in the area that the government was not ready to accommodate recalcitrance. In that expedition, more than 2,000 people were killed and an unjustifiable amount of property was destroyed (**Aghalino, 2017**). A manifest consequence of the violent response of the state security agencies to the crisis in the region is the militarisation of the region. The Navy has been

guarding oil installations and escorting oil shipments since the 1990s. The army also had personnel deployed to the Niger Delta. There have been crackdowns on the militants and troublemakers in the region. This, it must be said, involved massive military operations with serious financial implications for the nation.

The point we can necessarily add is that, when President Muhammadu Buhari assumed office in 2015, he was willing to wield the big stick in taming the Niger Delta monster. However, local and international pressures as well as the futility of a violent approach to resolving the issues in contention must have influenced the President to have a re-think and opted for dialogue. On 1<sup>st</sup> November, 2016, the President met the representatives of the people of the region who presented 16 demands (Aghalino, 2017). For now, there is constructive engagement of the people, as there is a semblance of peace in the grave yard or punctuated crises. What we must note as we conclude is that, in the history of the Niger Delta as shown in the preceding pages, the kinetic approach to the resolution of disaffection has failed consecutively. What has proved enduring is constructive engagement.

### **Contributions to Knowledge and the Teaching of History**

Our labour in the vineyard of history in the Niger Delta was carefully woven around the reinterpretation of sources, enshrining the mini-history of the region into the mega economic, environmental and social history of Nigeria. This is a shift from trade and politics to the interrogation of the oil question; the cause and effect of environmental deterioration, resistance politics from Nana of Itsekiri, Jaja of Opopo to Ken Saro Wiwa and beyond to Tompolo, Henry Orkar, other warlords who gave the struggle in the Niger Delta a colourisation in the toga of the economics of conflicts and from cause to commerce. We interrogated the peremptory nature of the maritime space from a time perspective against the backdrop of maritime insecurity, pollution, piracy and other illicit activities as well as bunkering and illegal refineries. Our approach is to historicise and locate the issues within the long-drawn oily frictions that predated the present Nigerian state. I feel the

imperative to redress the palpable imbalance that placed a little premium on the need to advance and synchronise the history of the region with the mega-economic history of Nigeria and by extension fill a lacuna in the history of oils in the region. We challenged the extant narrative which seems to indicate that the conflict in the region is a recent phenomenon. We have thoroughly interrogated the oil question from a historical perspective and inter-group relations. This we did with an expansive and malleable interdisciplinary approach without letting go of the historicity of the region since 1956.

We also interrogated the social, political, and cultural history of the Niger Delta and conceptualised the Benin mirage as it relates to the traditions of origin of the people of the Western Niger Delta. Here lies what we profess! I have a seamless collaboration with colleagues in the course of our research and mentored others in this direction. At the last count, I have supervised and graduated 13 Ph.Ds and countless number of Master's and undergraduate students. I can testify that my mentees are doing well. One of them, Professor Dawood Egbefo has just been appointed, Acting Vice-Chancellor at the Edo State University, Iyanmho.

Mr. Vice Chancellor, our vintage and periscopic contribution to knowledge in the history of the Niger Delta, steeped in time depth as well as social, economic and political implications of crude business, implies a thorough dissection of the anatomy of crude business. The impact of our research work is seen in the number of citations of my publications in Google Scholar. The publications have been robustly cited in different platforms. The icing on the cake of my academic contribution was my appointment as a Professor in 2012 and my election as President of the Historical Society of Nigeria, ten years after in 2022. We have also contributed to the advancement of our discipline by actively being involved in the affairs of the Historical Society of Nigeria. We collaborated with other members of the Society in the resuscitation of the teaching of History in our schools; and equally developed curriculum and texts in this regard, for Basic Education. History is now compulsory at the Basic School level!

## Conclusion

Mr. Vice Chancellor, let me conclude this lecture by stating that blood may be thicker than water, but oil is thicker than both. This is so because, for oil, the state may be willing to sacrifice anyone bold enough to stand in the way of the flow of sweet crude. Again, it is apposite to note that our approach in our research in the swamp full of dollars and insurgents is to follow the trajectory of defending tradition (Ogbogbo, 2017), in the form of historicising the issues in contention in our field of endeavour by also freeing the history of crude business from the perspective of timeless ethnographic present. Indeed, the topsyturvy and the agony of crude expropriation and development by dispossession are central to our research endeavour. The process of the prospecting for, and exploitation of oil may be crude as attested to by its negative externalities that may be likened to the devil's excreta. Nevertheless, our publications and labour in the vineyard of crude oil orchard have shown that, indeed, crude is sweet. Sweet crude has been instrumental in driving growth and development in the oil-bearing belt in particular and Nigeria in general. The proverbial Southern Lady of Means, as espoused by Lord Lewis Vernon Harcourt, British Secretary of the Colonies in the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, remains the bastion of the fiscal existence of Nigeria which is predicated on the sweet crude. Nevertheless, due in part to the colonial origin of the oil industry, it still has all the trappings of the enclave economy. The people in the oil-bearing enclave are outsiders in the crude business and as we have shown in the course of this lecture, the people have elected to 'steal' and vandalise pipelines because, in part, they are tired of hearing of the promissory notes of plans in the pipelines to develop their region. In a comic sense, it is just right to 'open' up the pipes to see the plans placed in the pipelines for delivery. When the government and the oil stakeholders are jolted from their slumber, knee-jerk responses in form of placebos are offered to the people. In consequence, the people have devised alternative coping strategies in the form of oil bunkering, and illicit and artisanal refineries, which if properly harnessed, could be the bastion for the transformation of the oil industry.



## **Recommendations**

Vice Chancellor, sir, our crude journey has been eventful, sweet and also odoriferous, yet some global best practices and suggestions could bring sustainable peace to the oil-bearing enclave of the Niger Delta. Let me, however, hasten to state that Historians shy away from offering recommendations, particularly on issues of lived experience. However, the focus of my research is an interface between the past and the present. As such, I am at liberty to plead with Clio, the muse of history, to give me a place to stand so that I can proffer some recommendations. The libations may be poured after now! In light of this lecture, the following recommendations are made to achieve sustainable peace in the oil-bearing enclave of the Niger Delta and to fumigate the devil's excreta:

1. The quest for resource control has been a recurring decimal in the oil-bearing enclave of Nigeria. There is a compelling need for a redefinition of property rights and resource ownership in Nigeria.
2. The impunity and unsustainable environmental practices of the oil multinationals and local oil firms must be checked and regulatory authorities must insist on adherence to best oil field practices.
3. There is the need to strengthen regulatory agencies such as the National Environmental Standards and Regulations Enforcement Agency (NESREA) and National Oil Spill Detection and Response Agency (NOSDRA) to be proactive in the enforcement of standards and regulations to protect the delicate environment of the Niger Delta.
4. The government must stop criminalising the activities of the operators of indigenous refineries and steadily work toward liberalising their operations so that the operators can be quarantined, regulated and their nascent technology harnessed for the national interest.
5. The minuscule payment of compensation should be revisited to be in line with global best practices.

6. The various intervention agencies in the region should be harmonised in order to have a coordinated approach to the development of the region and to reduce the pilfering of the little resources available.
7. In all, Nigeria must begin to look beyond oil through diversification of the economy and striking a balance between developing the oil industry and domestic industries as it is done in Norway and Saudi Arabia.
8. There is a compelling need for the introduction of Resource Extraction and Environmental History into the curriculum of our schools. This is imperative so that our students may be at home early enough on the implications of environmental despoliation, the resource curse and the necessity of the commons.

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