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# AN APPRAISAL OF THE CAUSES AND NATURE OF CONFLICTS IN THE EASTERN NIGER DELTA, 1800–2009

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**Abstract**
This paper examined the causes and nature of conflicts in the Eastern Niger Delta from 1800 to 2009. It traced the historical development of conflict from the oil palm produce era, through the colonial-independence transition, to the petroleum resource era. The paper was guided by Realism and Frustration-Aggression Theory, which provided a framework for analysing the pursuit of power and resources, as well as the consequences of accumulated political, economic and social grievances. The analysis of the study identified commercial rivalry, intra-state power struggles, colonial violence, political marginalisation, resource exploitation, environmental destruction, livelihood loss, unemployment and the manipulation of communal tensions as important causes of conflict. It further revealed that the nature of conflict changed over time: from inter-state commercial wars and colonial punitive expeditions to community protest, state repression, organized militancy and intra- and inter-community violence. The paper argued that sustainable peace cannot be achieved through military suppression or amnesty measures alone without addressing the structural conditions that reproduce conflict. It recommended equitable resource allocation, environmental remediation, meaningful political representation and inclusive development as essential components of durable conflict resolution. The paper concluded that the history of conflict in the Eastern Niger Delta must be understood as a connected historical process shaped by changing forms of resource competition, political exclusion and governance failure.

***Keywords: Conflict, Eastern Niger Delta, Resource Exploitation, Political Marginalization, Frustration-Aggression Theory***

## Introduction

The Eastern Niger Delta of Nigeria has been one of the most persistently conflict-prone regions in sub-Saharan Africa. For more than two centuries, the communities of Bonny, Kalabari, Opobo, Okrika, Andoni, Ogoni, and Nembe-Brass have experienced successive cycles of armed conflict, resource dispossession, and political marginalization that have left the region simultaneously among the wealthiest in natural resource endowments and among the most profoundly underdeveloped in human welfare indicators in all of Nigeria. Understanding the causes and nature of these conflicts is not merely an academic exercise but a practical necessity: without a clear diagnosis of what has driven conflict in the region across two centuries, the prescriptions for peace will continue to address symptoms rather than causes, producing the pattern of temporary cessations and inevitable resumptions that has characterized the Eastern Niger Delta's conflict history from the colonial era to the 2009 Presidential Amnesty Programme.

The existing literature on Niger Delta conflict has produced valuable scholarship, but it has tended to focus predominantly on the petroleum resource era from the 1990s onwards, treating the region's earlier conflict history as background rather than as an essential analytical foundation for understanding the contemporary crisis (Watts, 2004; Badmus, 2010; Ikelegbe, 2001). This paper argues that a full and adequate appraisal of the causes and nature of conflict in the Eastern Niger Delta must engage with the full sweep of the region's conflict history from 1800 to 2009, because the structural conditions that drive conflict in the region (commercial exploitation of natural

resources, political exclusion of minority communities, environmental destruction of livelihoods, and governance failure) are not products of the oil economy alone but have deeper historical roots traceable to the earliest decades of the nineteenth century. The relationship between resource commerce, arms acquisition, and armed conflict in the Eastern Niger Delta predates the petroleum resource (Hydrocarbon Produce) economy by well over a century.

**Statement of the Problem**

Although scholarship has examined conflict in the Niger Delta, much of the literature has concentrated on the hydrocarbon resource era, particularly from the 1990s, while treating earlier conflicts largely as background. This emphasis risks obscuring the historical roots and continuities of conflict in the Eastern Niger Delta. The paper identifies a need to examine the region's conflict history across the period 1800–2009, including the commercial rivalries of the oil palm era, colonial intervention, the political marginalisation of minority communities, and the resource and environmental grievances associated with petroleum extraction. The central problem, therefore, is how these changing historical conditions produced different forms of conflict and how their continuities help explain the persistence of insecurity in the region.

**Theoretical Framework**

**Realism and Frustration-Aggression Theories**

This paper is guided by two complementary theoretical frameworks: Realism and the Frustration-Aggression theory. Applied together, they provide a multi-level analytical lens capable of illuminating both the structural forces that generate conditions for conflict and the motivational dynamics through which communities and states are driven to armed responses. Realism, as enunciated by Morgenthau (1948), Waltz (1979), and Carr (1964), posits that the fundamental driver of political behavior is the pursuit of power and self-interest in an anarchic environment where no supreme authority exists to guarantee security or enforce agreements. Kissinger (1994), observed that power and interest are the primary currencies of political exchange in the conduct of statecraft. Applied to the Eastern Niger Delta, Realism explains the behavior of successive external actors (the British Royal Niger Company, the colonial administration, the post-independence Nigerian state, and multinational oil corporations) each of which pursued its interest in controlling the region's resource wealth through the deployment of superior power, including military force, legal instruments, and economic leverage, against the communities whose resources it sought to exploit. Obuah (2021) confirmed that Realism remains an indispensable framework for understanding how state and corporate actors calculate and pursue interests in resource-rich conflict zones, making it directly applicable to this study.

The Frustration-Aggression theory, originally formulated by Dollard, Doob, Miller, Mowrer and Sears (1939) and later refined by Berkowitz (1989), holds that aggression is a predictable consequence of frustration — defined as the systematic blocking of goal-directed behavior. When individuals or communities are consistently denied achievement of goals they regard as legitimate (economic development, environmental security, political representation, cultural recognition) accumulated frustration generates aggressive responses that can escalate into organized armed conflict. This theory has direct explanatory power for the Eastern Niger Delta, where community aspirations for a fair share of resource revenues, environmental protection, and political participation were systematically denied across the study period by successive state and corporate actors. As Fasuan, Adetunberu and Oluyede (2018) documented, continued militancy in the Niger Delta is a direct manifestation of frustrations from political corruption and structural neglect. The armed conflicts of the region (from the inter-city-state wars of the palm oil era to the MEND insurgency of

the 2000s) are best understood as rational aggressive responses to accumulated structural frustration rather than as expressions of ethnic rivalry or criminal opportunism.

## Causes and Nature of Conflicts in the Eastern Niger Delta 1800–1914

### Commercial Rivalry and Inter-State Conflict

The primary cause of conflict among the Eastern Niger Delta city-states during the nineteenth century was intense commercial competition for control of the palm oil trade routes and hinterland markets that constituted the economic foundation of the region's political power. The eastern city-states of Bonny, Kalabari, Opobo, Okrika, and Andoni derived their wealth and political authority from their roles as commercial intermediaries between the oil palm-producing communities of the interior and the European merchant vessels anchored along the coast. The enormous revenues generated by this brokerage role created both the financial capacity and the commercial incentive to acquire firearms for the enforcement of commercial monopolies and the exclusion of rival communities from lucrative markets (Dike, 1956). Inikori's (1977) quantitative analysis established that between 283,000 and 394,000 firearms per annum were imported into West Africa during 1750 to 1807, with a significant proportion flowing into Eastern Niger Delta communities through the Atlantic trade. This mass influx of modern firearms into communities already engaged in fierce commercial competition created the material conditions for armed conflict on an unprecedented scale.

The most clearly documented inter-state commercial conflict of this era was the Andoni-Bonny Seven-Year War of approximately 1839 to 1846. The war originated in Bonny's systematic effort to establish monopoly control over the hinterland palm oil markets by blocking the Andoni from independent access to European buyers, generating the commercial frustration that drove the Andoni under their warrior-king Otuo Ogbalakon to armed resistance (Ejituwu, 1991; Okorobia & Olali, 2013). The war lasted approximately seven years before being resolved under British commercial pressure through the peace treaty of 1846, which suspended the fighting without addressing the underlying commercial rivalry. The Kalabari-Okrika wars of 1863 to 1871 further illustrate the commercial logic of palm oil era conflict. Between 1863 and 1871, Bonny fought Kalabari; Bonny and Okrika fought against Kalabari; and Kalabari fought Nembe in a complex pattern of shifting alliances and armed confrontations, all driven by competition for the control of trade routes and hinterland markets (Okorobia & Olali, 2013; Wariboko, 1989). The most precisely documented single engagement of this conflict cycle was June 26, 1871, when the combined forces of Bonny and Okrika launched a direct assault on Elem Kalabari itself, with the fighting continuing the entire day without decisive outcome.

### Intra-State Conflict and Power Struggles

Beyond inter-state commercial wars, the oil palm produce era generated significant intra-state conflict within individual Eastern Niger Delta kingdoms, driven by the enormous wealth generated by the palm oil trade and the political power it conferred on successful trading houses. The most consequential of these was the Bonny Civil War of 1869, which arose from the rivalry between two of Bonny's most powerful trading houses — the Anna Pepple House under Jubo Jubogha (King Jaja) and the Manilla Pepple House under Chief Oko Jumbo. The conflict erupted on September 12 to 13, 1869, when the Manilla Pepple House launched armed attacks against Jaja's positions with cannon fire across Bonny's waterways. Rather than prosecuting a destructive civil war, Jaja led fourteen of Bonny's eighteen war canoe houses to establish the independent Kingdom of Opobo in December 1870 at the strategic mouth of the Imo River, from where he monopolized the palm oil trade routes of the Eastern Niger Delta. By May 1870, British firms at Bonny had already lost an estimated £100,000 of trade as palm oil flows were diverted to Opobo (Cookey, 1974; Dike, 1956). The Obia

Market War within the Kalabari Kingdom of 1879 to 1881, in which the commercial success of Chief Igbanibo Will Braide generated a conspiracy by the ruling establishment against him, further demonstrates how the enormous financial stakes of the palm oil trade made armed competition for commercial supremacy as intense within city-states as between them (ASIRI Magazine, 2016).

**Colonial Violence as a Cause of Conflict**

Another major category of conflict in the oil palm produce era was the armed resistance of Eastern Niger Delta communities to British colonial commercial and political encroachment. The British colonial state's deployment of military force against communities that resisted its commercial monopoly constituted a form of externally-imposed conflict that generated both immediate violence and long-term structural grievances. The deportation of King Jaja of Opobo on September 19, 1887, ordered by British Consul Harry Johnston after luring Jaja to negotiations under a false promise of safe conduct, represented the most dramatic episode of colonial violence against an Eastern Niger Delta ruler. Jaja was deported not for armed aggression but for the commercial crime of monopolizing trade routes that British merchants wished to access directly (Cookey, 1974). The destruction of Nembe-Brass in 1895 following the Akassa Raid on the Royal Niger Company's depot represented a punitive military response to a community whose traditional trading role had been destroyed by the company's monopoly. The British punitive expedition burned the town of Brass, killed hundreds of civilians, and reduced one of the Eastern Niger Delta's most historically significant trading states to material ruin, demonstrating how colonial military power functioned as an instrument of commercial subjugation rather than genuine pacification (Jones, 1963; Tamuno, 1972).

**The Colonial-Independence Transition and the Structural Conditions for Post-Colonial Conflict, 1914–1955**

The amalgamation of the southern and northern Nigerian protectorates under Lord Frederick Lugard in 1914 created the political framework within which the post-colonial oil conflict would eventually develop. For the Eastern Niger Delta communities, amalgamation meant permanent incorporation into a centralized colonial state dominated by three major ethnic nationalities (Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba, and Igbo) in which the minority ethnic groups of the resource-rich south had no effective political leverage. As Suberu (2001) demonstrated, this constitutional architecture embedded the political marginalization of minority communities into the foundational structures of the Nigerian state, a condition that would generate the structural frustrations driving the armed conflicts of the post-colonial period.

The Henry Willink Commission of 1957 to 1958, appointed to investigate the fears of minority ethnic groups, acknowledged the developmental neglect and political marginalization of the Niger Delta peoples but recommended the establishment of a Niger Delta Development Board rather than a separate state for the region. As Naanen (1995) documented, this rejection of the minority communities' primary demand for their own state (in which they would be the political majority rather than permanent minorities) represented a critical missed opportunity to address the structural causes of ethnic minority political frustration before independence. The failure of the Willink Commission to recommend meaningful structural reform of Nigeria's political framework planted the seeds of the armed conflict that would follow the discovery of oil in the region in 1956, ensuring that the communities sitting atop Nigeria's petroleum reserves would enter the post-colonial era without the political institutions needed to secure their interests in the exploitation of those resources.

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**Resource Exploitation, the Land Use Act, and the Resource Curse**

The discovery of commercially viable crude oil at Oloibiri in Bayelsa State in 1956 and the rapid expansion of oil production across the Eastern Niger Delta in the 1960s and 1970s transformed the material stakes of the region's conflict system. As Ross (2004) demonstrated, oil significantly increases the likelihood of conflict in regions where extraction occurs in minority community territories whose residents receive inadequate shares of revenues generated. The Eastern Niger Delta exemplified this dynamic precisely: the communities of Bonny, Kalabari, Opobo, Okrika, Andoni, and Ogoni sat atop some of Nigeria's most productive oil and gas deposits, yet the 1978 Land Use Act under General Olusegun Obasanjo vested all land in the state, effectively extinguishing customary community land rights and eliminating any legal basis for community ownership of the petroleum beneath their ancestral territories. The derivation principle that had returned thirty percent of oil revenues to producing states in 1960 was progressively reduced to a mere one-and-a-half percent by 1981 before being partially restored to thirteen percent in 1999 — a fiscal allocation that communities producing the bulk of national revenue experienced as a grotesque injustice (Suberu, 2001; Naanen, 1995). Sachs and Warner (2001) identified the resource curse dynamic that this configuration produced: natural resource wealth generating governance failure, fiscal inequity, and the structural conditions for sustained conflict rather than development.

**Environmental Destruction and Livelihood Loss as Causes of Conflict**

A major cause of conflict in the petroleum resource era that had no parallel in the oil palm produce era was the systematic environmental destruction caused by decades of oil extraction. Oil spills, gas flaring, dredging for pipeline construction, and the collateral damage of military operations in oil-producing areas destroyed vast areas of mangrove forest, contaminated rivers and creeks, and eliminated the fishing and agricultural livelihoods on which millions of Eastern Niger Delta community members depended for their survival. As Homer-Dixon (1999) argued, the destruction of the natural resource base on which communities depend generates precisely the conditions of frustrated livelihood insecurity that drive armed mobilization. In the Eastern Niger Delta, communities that had sustainably exploited the region's rich ecological resources for centuries found themselves unable to fish poisoned waters or farm contaminated land, generating a condition of enforced poverty in the midst of extraordinary resource wealth that Ibeanu (2000) described as a primary mechanism of environmental conflict in the region. The UNDP's Niger Delta Human Development Report of 2006 provided statistical confirmation: the Eastern Niger Delta's Human Development Index was among the lowest in Nigeria despite the region producing the vast majority of the country's oil revenues — the resource curse made measurable. Gas flaring alone, which released toxic pollutants into the atmosphere above Eastern Niger Delta communities continuously for decades, contributed to respiratory diseases, acid rain, the destruction of agricultural crops, and the contamination of water supplies, generating health emergencies that compounded the economic grievances driving communities toward armed resistance (Kashi & Watts, 2008).

**Political Marginalization and the Rise of Organized Resistance**

The political exclusion of Eastern Niger Delta minority communities from meaningful participation in the governance of the oil resources beneath their land was the most fundamental cause of the escalating armed conflict of the hydrocarbon resource era. The centralization of oil revenues in the federal government, the dominance of federal politics by the three major ethnic nationalities, and the consistent deployment of military force to suppress peaceful protest in the Niger Delta created conditions in which communities perceived armed resistance as their only viable means of political leverage. The founding of the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP) in 1990 under Ken Saro-Wiwa, and the promulgation of the Ogoni Bill of Rights demanding

environmental remediation, resource control, and political autonomy, represented the clearest articulation of these structural political grievances (Naanen, 1995; Osaghae, 1995). MOSOP adopted non-violent mass mobilization as its strategy, organizing sit-ins, community boycotts of Shell operations, and international advocacy to impose costs on the oil industry and the Nigerian state without resort to arms.

The Nigerian military government's response to MOSOP's non-violent campaign demonstrated with terrible clarity why Eastern Niger Delta communities concluded that peaceful advocacy was insufficient against a state that prioritized oil revenues over human rights. The deployment of the Internal Security Task Force under Major Paul Okuntimo against Ogoni communities from 1993 onwards — characterized by extrajudicial killings, mass arrests, destruction of property, and the intimidation of civilian populations — imposed conditions of military occupation on communities guilty of nothing more than demanding their rights (Human Rights Watch, 1995). The extrajudicial execution of Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight MOSOP colleagues on November 10, 1995 sent an unambiguous message to other Eastern Niger Delta communities: peaceful political advocacy would be met with lethal state force. The consequence was the radicalization of Niger Delta political activism that the state's suppression was intended to prevent. The Kaiama Declaration of December 1998, issued by the Ijaw Youth Council and demanding the withdrawal of all oil companies from Ijaw territory and the devolution of resource control to producing communities, marked the formal transition from civil society advocacy to organized armed resistance as the primary political strategy of Niger Delta youth. As Ikelegbe (2001) documented, the organizational infrastructure of civil society that had sustained peaceful advocacy was now being repurposed to prosecute armed insurgency.

**The MEND Insurgency and the Peak of Petroleum Resource Era Conflict**

The emergence of the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) in January 2006, when it claimed responsibility for the capture of four foreign oil workers in the Western Delta, marked the beginning of the most organized and strategically sophisticated phase of armed conflict in the Eastern Niger Delta's history. MEND employed a strategy of attacking oil infrastructure (pipelines, flow stations, export terminals) combined with kidnapping of oil industry workers for ransom, to impose economic costs on the Nigerian state and oil companies that far exceeded the direct costs of any individual attack. At the peak of the insurgency in 2008 to 2009, MEND-affiliated operations had reduced Nigerian crude oil production from approximately 2.2 million barrels per day to as low as 1.2 million barrels per day — a reduction representing approximately ninety-six million dollars in daily lost revenue at prevailing oil prices (Human Rights Watch, 2010). In the Eastern Niger Delta specifically, the Nigeria Liquefied Natural Gas facility at Bonny Island, one of the most strategically significant pieces of oil and gas infrastructure in Africa, was repeatedly disrupted by attacks on the gas supply pipelines feeding it, generating enormous financial losses and severely damaging Nigeria's reputation as a reliable energy supplier to international markets.

**Intra-Community and Inter-Community Conflict in the Crude Oil Era**

Beyond the conflict between Niger Delta communities and the Nigerian state and oil corporations, the crude oil era generated a particularly destructive form of armed violence — conflict between Niger Delta communities themselves and between rival armed factions within the same community. The NDPVF-NDV conflict of 2003 to 2004, in which the Niger Delta People's Volunteer Force under Mujahid Dokubo-Asari of Buguma in the Kalabari Kingdom clashed with the Niger Delta Vigilante under Ateke Tom of Okrika, killing hundreds of civilians and displacing thousands of residents from communities across Rivers State, exemplified how the political economy of oil patronage corrupted the legitimate political mobilization of the insurgency era into personal and

factional armed competition for access to state and corporate resources (Human Rights Watch, 2005). Both Asari and Tom had initially risen to prominence through legitimate resource control activism, but the combination of oil patronage networks, corrupt electoral politics, and the availability of military-grade weapons transformed what might have been a political competition into a devastating armed confrontation.

The Andoni-Ogoni conflict of July 1993 illustrates a different but equally significant form of intra-regional conflict in the petroleum produce era: the deliberate manipulation of inter-community tensions by external actors to suppress political mobilization. When armed attacks on Ogoni communities attributed to Andoni warriors resulted in approximately sixty deaths in July 1993, the Nigerian military government moved quickly to frame the violence as an ethnic conflict that discredited MOSOP's political campaign. Professor Claude Ake, appointed to investigate the attacks, concluded that the evidence pointed to the deliberate engineering of apparent communal conflict by forces with an interest in suppressing the Ogoni struggle, supported by the testimony of Nigerian soldiers who described their participation in operations designed to appear as communal attacks (Human Rights Watch, 1995). This episode reveals a structural cause of conflict in the crude oil era that has been insufficiently analyzed in the existing literature: the Nigerian state's use of manufactured communal conflict as a tool of political repression against minority communities seeking resource control.

The youth unemployment crisis that accompanied the crude oil era across the Eastern Niger Delta was an equally important structural cause of both militant and criminal violence. As Oyefusi (2007) demonstrated through survey-based analysis of Niger Delta residents, individual propensity to participate in armed struggle was most strongly predicted by perceived injustice in oil revenue distribution and unemployment — confirming at the level of individual decision-making the macro-level frustration-aggression dynamic identified in this article's theoretical framework. Ukeje (2001) further documented how the collapse of agricultural and fishing livelihoods caused by oil-related environmental destruction created a generation of young men for whom armed groups offered the only available economic opportunity and social identity, making the proliferation of cult organizations and militant networks in the Eastern Niger Delta a structural consequence of the oil economy's failure to provide alternative livelihoods for the communities bearing its costs.

## CONCLUSION

This paper has provided a systematic historical appraisal of the causes and nature of conflicts in the Eastern Niger Delta from 1800 to 2009. The analysis has identified structural causes of conflict that have operated, in varying configurations, across the full span of the study period: the exploitation of natural resources by external commercial and state actors without adequate benefit to the producing communities; the political exclusion of Eastern Niger Delta minority communities from the governance of their resources; the environmental destruction of the livelihoods on which communities depended for their survival and economic security; the intra-community power struggles generated by the enormous wealth at stake in the resource economy; and the deliberate instrumentalization of communal conflict by external actors seeking to suppress legitimate political mobilization.

The nature of conflict evolved significantly across the study period. In the oil palm produce era from 1800 to 1914, conflicts were primarily inter-state commercial wars among the Eastern Niger Delta city-states, conducted through the war canoe house system, alongside colonial punitive expeditions designed to enforce British commercial hegemony. In the colonial-independence transition period from 1914 to 1955, the primary dynamic was the embedding of structural political exclusion into Nigeria's federal constitutional framework, laying the foundations for the conflicts that followed. In the petroleum produce era from 1956 to 2009, the nature of conflict diversified

dramatically: community protests against oil company operations, state military repression of political activism, organized armed insurgency, intra-community factional violence, and deliberate state manipulation of communal tensions all constituted dimensions of a conflict system of unprecedented complexity and lethality.

The Frustration-Aggression theory provides the most precise explanatory framework for understanding the motivational dynamics of conflict in the Eastern Niger Delta, demonstrating that the armed resistance of Eastern Niger Delta communities across two centuries is most accurately understood as the rational aggressive response of communities whose legitimate aspirations have been systematically frustrated by the structural conditions of resource exploitation, political exclusion, and governance failure. The Realist framework explains with equal precision why successive external actors (the British colonial state, the Royal Niger Company, multinational oil corporations, and the post-colonial Nigerian state) have consistently prioritized power and commercial interest over justice in their management of the region's resource wealth.

The implication for conflict resolution is clear. Durable peace in the Eastern Niger Delta cannot be achieved by addressing the armed manifestations of conflict alone through military suppression, disarmament programmes, or security sector reform, without simultaneously addressing the five structural causes identified in this article. The Presidential Amnesty Programme of 2009, which achieved a significant and necessary reduction in armed violence, has been unable to produce sustainable peace precisely because it addressed the instruments of conflict without transforming the conditions that generate the demand for those instruments. Sustainable conflict resolution in the Eastern Niger Delta requires fundamental reform of resource revenue allocation to ensure communities receive adequate benefit from the extraction of their resources; comprehensive environmental remediation of the accumulated ecological damage caused by decades of oil operations; genuine political representation of minority communities in the governance of the federation; and inclusive developmental investment that provides economic alternatives to armed group membership for the region's unemployed youth population. Without these structural transformations, the Eastern Niger Delta's conflict will continue to reproduce itself regardless of whatever technical measures are taken to manage its armed manifestations.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

i. Resource revenue allocation should be reformed to ensure that producing communities receive an equitable benefit from the resources extracted from their territories.
ii. Comprehensive environmental remediation should be undertaken to address the ecological damage associated with decades of oil operations.
iii. Minority communities in the Eastern Niger Delta should have meaningful political representation in decisions concerning resource governance and development.
iv. Development programmes should provide inclusive and sustainable economic opportunities, particularly for unemployed young people, as alternatives to participation in armed groups.
v. Conflict-resolution initiatives should address intra-community and inter-community grievances and guard against the manipulation of communal tensions for political purposes.

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