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# **Contingent relations, cult(ure)s of respectability and youth mobilizations in the oil rich Niger Delta**

**Akin Iwilade**

## **Introduction**

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

But for all of the Delta literature's robust engagement with social mobilization in the region, many of the subtle but important basis and forms of social mobilization are often lost in a narrative dominated by resistance, marginalization and repression. Yet, the evidence suggests that these processes of resistance are underpinned in part by youth mobilizations in the region which are intricately linked to the subtle but powerful politics of respectability and to the interesting ways in which it shapes behavior within youth cults/gangs. There is also considerable evidence that social mobilization is often dependent on provisional (even fortuitous) actions which ultimately build contingent networks that are able to navigate the uncertain social conditions imposed by the oil economy. These two tools through which youth imagine themselves as well as mobilize against the state and oil multinationals –but also sometimes in defence of this very same alliance- have been largely ignored by the literature.

This paper brings these issues to the fore and examines how youth use respectability and contingency as tools for social mobilization in Nigeria's Niger Delta. It explores the concepts of *Alaowei* and *kemeowei*, the tensions that temporality and ageing impose on them and how they aid social mobilization among violent youth actors. It also links temporality to the building of contingent network relations and shows how these shape new forms of social mobilization in the Niger Delta.

In order to address these issues, this paper is divided into four interconnected substantive sections. The first section contextualizes the politics of oil extraction in the Niger Delta and the place of youth in it. The next section then briefly discusses what it means to be *Kemowei* and highlights the struggles of youth to find meaning both through it and within the spaces it

structures. The section that follows provides a broader discussion about the role of respectability, as captured by the notion of Alaowei in the mobilization strategies of Delta youth cults and gangs. The paper then moves on to discuss contingency as a tool of social mobilization.

### **Youth, oil extraction and politics in the Niger Delta**

Analysing the long duree of global energy history, Michael Watts (2003: 5089) makes the point that ‘the annals of oil are an uninterrupted chronicle of naked aggression, genocide and the violent law of the corporate frontier’. While this damning assessment may not reflect the reality of states like Norway who seem to have largely escaped the resource curse (Belkina & Sarkova 2014), it is borne out in many ways in the oil rich but volatile Niger Delta region of Nigeria. Far from being a resource for development, oil appears to have become a violent force that has blighted the environment, society and politics of the region, as well as Nigeria more broadly (Okonta 2002, Obi 2006, Iwilade 2012).

In the time between the Mining Regulation (Oil) Ordinance of Southern Nigeria enacted in 1907, the Colonial Minerals Ordinance No 17 of 1914, and the launching of the Presidential Amnesty Programme in 2009, the Niger Delta became both a source of hope as well as a symbol of much of what is wrong with the rentier post- colony. This paradox is articulated in multiple ways across the Niger Delta and highlights the complexity of a region whose constant upheavals signpost the failures of the state and the implications these failures can have for the most vulnerable social categories residing within its borders. From the paradox of wealth and poverty (Imobigbe 2011), to that of a shared sense of deprivation nestling in often violent inter/intra-ethnic tensions (Welch 1995, Nwajiaku 2005) and of the difference between state and community conceptions of security (Ibeanu 2002), the region has had the worst that the political economy of oil extraction has to offer. Watts (2010: 61) captures this paradox when he noted that Nigerian oil-fuelled capitalism contains a:

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

These contradictory impacts of oil in the Niger Delta underline not just the complexity of the

resource (or indeed natural resources extraction more generally) as a driver of development but also the specific ways in which postcolonial institutions can shape or be shaped by the flow of a globally relevant commodity.

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

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

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

### **Being *Alaowe* and being youth**

Among the Ijaw people of Ekeremor in the oil state of Bayelsa, it is said that the main goal of a man in life is to become *Alaowe*. The word *Alaowe* is derived from *Ala*, meaning ‘king’ and ‘owe’ meaning ‘man’. Taking together, ‘Ala’ and ‘owe’ or ‘alaowe’ refers to an advanced state of manhood in which a man becomes a man of respect and means. To become *alaowe*, a male must first become *kemeowe*, that is ‘be a man’. *Kemeowe* is derived from the words ‘keme’ meaning ‘human’ and *Owei* meaning ‘male’. The etymology of the words indicate a linkage between gaining respect, being a man and being human. The implication is that one’s very humanity is in doubt until one can claim the status of *Kemowe* and that to qualify for social status, one must become not just a man but a man of means.

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

The balancing process also often requires performing respectability when actually being respectable or, if one likes, ‘being *alaowe*’, is difficult or momentarily impossible. Across various youth contexts, many writers have shown how the performance of respectability can be central to social relationships and mobility. Sasha Newell’s account of Ivorian *les bluffeurs* for instance, offers useful comparative insights into the dynamics of respect and shows how such activities can make sense within what he called a ‘cosmology of social practice’ that extract meaning from local contexts and rethinks ‘connections between mimesis (the magic of the copy) and the postcolonial relationship to modernity (Newell: 2012: 3). In this regard, youth

appropriate and perform actions that help signal their respectability even when their material circumstances do not quite meet the *alaowei* status. The implication of this is that even though access to the material accoutrements of ‘modernity’ and social respectability are important, they are only socially useful in so far as possessing them can be signaled through what Veblen (1899) called ‘conspicuous consumption’. Those who don’t actually possess them, can navigate social relationships merely by performing consumption. Friedman (1994), makes the point, in relation to the extravagance of Congo’s *Sapeurs*, that consumption is essentially about self-making, self definition and self-maintenance rather than a rationalist mode of economic accumulation. By linking consumption to self-making, Friedman’s work, like that of Newell (2012) illustrate the innovative ways in which youth inhabit social spaces by profoundly questioning dominant modernities at the same time that they seek to express it.

The multiple struggles for respect that young people are engrossed with also illuminate the shifting meanings of youth itself. They highlight, for instance, how young people respond to specific labels which try to impose pejorative meanings on youthhood. These meanings include the idea of youth as unruly and disruptive of normal social order (Mokwena 1991, Sharp 1992, Abdullah 1997), or of youth as signifying dependence, marginality and exclusion (Stohl 2002, McMullin and Loughry 2004, Abbink 2005). To locate the meaning of youth one needs to acknowledge, as noted by Bayart (2009), four key things. First, that it is important to view youth as a social category within an intergenerational discourse. Second, this intergenerational discourse must be placed within a broader debate about the important ways in which power, authority and control frames social categories. Third, one must take due note of the shifting nature of power itself and how it affects the ways in which youth inhabits social spaces. Finally, one must view youth both as a lived experience as well as an imagined one (Christiansen, Utas and Vigh 2006, Bayart 2009; Ukeje & Iwilade 2012).

With regard to these four perspectives, one can discern that generational categories, such as childhood, youth and adulthood, are not neutral or even natural, but rather a ‘part of the struggle for influence and authority within almost every society’ (Christiantine, Utas and Vigh 2006: 11). Related to this struggle is a growing youth appropriation of the public sphere, a situation made largely possible by the emergence of new media technologies and all the empowering characteristics that they bear. As a consequence, youth has become a very critical category through which we may understand the dynamics of power, influence and control in the public sphere.

Where youth have to engage with levers of power in violent conflict contexts, the social meaning of the term could change profoundly. For one, being youth becomes an essentially active label. It tends to refer to those who circulate within what Maira and Soep (2005) called youthspheres and who participate actively in the disruptive processes of renegotiating the meanings of citizenship, of politics and of power. This means that *being youth* is profoundly different from *being young*. To be young, one needs to be socially marginal and be subject to social mores, even when those prevent effective navigation of multiple uncertainties. Youth however is an acquired status available only to those who are embedded in or can access the many violent networks that shape life experiences. Thinking about youth this way highlights a number of important issues. First, it underscores the centrality of actively ‘doing things’, that is, in the case of the Niger Delta, of participating in the gang culture to qualify to be youth. Being of the right generation or having similar experiences of social life means little if one is not within the networks of violence involved in the multiplicities of disruptive activities in the region. Youth in this sense captures a broad range of similar conflict or unstable contexts in which generational politics has thrown up a specific category of young people who have become socialised into violence on the one hand and who constantly stand in disruptive opposition to established authority from Guinea Bissau to El Barrio (Mokwena 1991, Burgess 1995, Vigh 2009). I use disruptive here not in a pejorative sense but to capture activities designed to challenge social norms or to renegotiate social relations. ‘Youth’ in this sense is apparently a ‘verb’ rather than a ‘noun’.

Second, while youthfulness can be individual in itself, to *be youth* in ways that matter to social navigation, it has to be expressed within the context of a social group. This implies that ‘youth’ is not just a verb, it is also a plural one.

The implications of this verb(*ial*) conceptualization of ‘youth’ are profound. In the first place, it fractures the generational category of the young and ultimately privileges those whose activities can be most disruptive of the social order. Many post conflict projects appear to disaggregate the generational category of the young along the verb(*ial*) distinction being proposed here. For instance, the 2009 Presidential Amnesty in the Niger Delta was structured in a way that makes a clear distinction between *the young* and *the youth* and focussed placating the political youth. The varied categories of ‘ex-fighters’, ‘child soldiers’, ‘rebels’ and so on, speak to a generational category of active social actors defined not so much by their age (social or biological) but to their disruptive engagement with established social order. Youth is not something one merely *becomes*, it is something one ‘does’. In other words, if we are to fully appreciate the impact of social consciousness it is important to understand that youth cannot

simply be ‘imagined or lived’ (Chrisantsen, Utas and Vigh 2006), it also has to be ‘done’ and in that way we can analytically separate social actors from a less forceful and marginalised generational category.

The contemporary history of the Niger Delta is in some ways a narrative of the coming of age of youth who, in the face of state repression and multinational oil company irresponsibility, discovered voice and activated latent agency (Obi 2009, Ebiede 2016, Iwilade 2017). Yet, the narrative is also about young people in the grip of manipulative patrimonial relationships who are recruited to violent causes that they neither believe in nor which they will significantly benefit from (Ezeonu 2014). Somewhere along this spectrum of agency and helplessness, young people experience and shape the social, political and economic implications of oil extraction in profound ways.

For many youth trying to survive within the Niger Delta’s violent oil political economy, their struggles are both framed and complicated by the pursuit of respectability and the shifting ways in which it impacts on their relationships with the repressive apparatus of the state. Respectability resonates profoundly and becoming *Alaowei* is the climax of a lifelong struggle to attain social maturity and adulthood and to do so by fulfilling the needs of the imagined past as well as the real present. It is the end for which various social tools, structures and systems are simply the means to attaining. It is however an ‘end’ that is quite undefined- an end that often ends in itself- sending its victim back to the starting line, often in a daze as to what exactly is respectable within that space or time or in fact what will be respectable after this phase of the struggle is done.

### **Cult(ure)s of respectability in the oil Delta and the temporalities of respect**

But how do Niger Delta youth imagine themselves and how does that imagination encourage youth to seek mobilization and participation in networks that promise so much precarity and danger? There are various answers to these questions. One may for instance, as Adunbi (2015) argued, claim that they are driven by the need to fulfill ancestral promises or, in Obi’s (2010) opinion, driven by an acute awareness of the marginalization of the region by the Nigerian State. One may also link it to criminality (Ezeonu 2014, Ingwe 2015). All three have been addressed quite richly in the literature and there is evidence that these motivations interact in complex ways and together can explain a great deal of youth mobilization in the region. Yet, for all their dominance of the literature in trying to explain youth mobilization and politics in the Delta, fieldwork data suggests that something else is also at least as important to the

sociality of youth as is history, marginalization or criminality. This often ignored, yet, important driver of youth sociality in the Niger Delta is the search for respectability.

The struggle to create what Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) referred to as hegemonic masculinity is occurring within two categories of youth in the ex-militant networks of Yenagoa<sup>1</sup>. These categories are the so-called ‘over-age youth’ (men in their late thirties and forties, sometimes even above fifty)<sup>2</sup> and the younger elements within the networks. Within ex-militant networks, there are a number of men, usually in their late thirties and forties, who had relatively high positions during the insurgency but have now become sad reminders of the politics of abandonment in the region. One of such men is UG. I first heard of him through recommendations from a contact in Yenagoa who thought he was in a good position to tell me all I needed to know about ex-militants in Bayelsa. When his name again came up a number of times in conversations with ex-militants in Port Harcourt, I knew he was someone I had to speak with. After weeks of phone calls mediated by my contact in Yenagoa, who is a young civil servant in the Bayelsa State service, UG eventually agreed to meet with me at his home on Yenagoa.

I met UG drinking with friends and comrades just by his small run down apartment. Parked outside his door was a brand new commuter bus belonging to the Ijaw Youth Council and which had been donated by the former minister of petroleum resources, Mrs Diezani Allison-Madueke. He was obviously a popular figure in the neighbourhood as many people greeted him warmly and I even got to see him in action when he was invited to help evict a guard whose boss had fired, but who refused to leave.

His home bore little evidence of how high up he had been within militant networks. It was clean but very sparsely furnished. It was also damp, a sign that it was not fully protected from the heavy moist in the Yenagoa air. He had a very distinguished air but it was obvious that frustration ran deeply below the surface as he spoke a lot about abandonment, the ‘inferiority complex’ of the local politicians who now run the area and how the Niger Delta still has not

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<sup>1</sup> Yenagoa is the capital of the oil rich state of Bayelsa.

<sup>2</sup> These are often men in their late thirties to early fifties who circulate within the Delta youth culture but have aged before being able to attain social adulthood. They are usually experienced in the politics of the Ijaw Youth Council and other similar youth organisations but still dependent on patrons for their basic material needs. They are not really ‘youth’ in the sense of being young, but they are also not elders in the sense of social independence. They are therefore referred to by youth in the region as ‘over-youth’

gotten a fair enough deal from the Nigerian state.

UG did not tell me his age, but he appears to be in his early forties since he spoke of his activities in the mid 2000s as a ‘thirty something year old man’. Before the Amnesty, UG had been a prominent mid-level commander in the Supreme Egbesu Assembly (SEA) and Niger Delta Freedom Fighters (NDFFF). He had also worked directly with the leadership of the IYC in the early periods shortly after its formation. He also had personal connections with well known senior militant commanders as well as links all across the Niger Delta. One would expect that an ‘ex- militant’ of his stature would have personally benefited much more from the millions of dollars in state patronage that have been channeled towards militants through the Amnesty and Post Amnesty Programmes as well as the lucrative pipeline protection contracts (Ubhenin 2013). After all, there is evidence all over the Niger Delta of the dramatic changes in the personal circumstances of militants (Ubhenin 2013). UG himself made clear of this when he told me that:

Those who thought we are bad guys, you know you hardly see pastors in militancy, but you know people that were written off have built big houses. Even most of those who even went straight, went through the normal education system, kept to the law, who are maybe lawyers or doctors don’t have anything to show for it. If you move around my state now, most beautiful houses you can find are owned by ex-militants. Some of them are using their money to try to mend their ways, I know people who now help widows and so on. Maybe they were not like that naturally, you know the environment can change people. Not all of us got that kind of money...Me? Well you have seen my house, do I look like someone that made millions or billions? As I am, I have known many people from years back, when we were nothing. But today, fingers are not equal. Some of them have become big, if they hear my name today they will be happy ‘asking ah, where have you been?’ I am still the same man, but no money.

After years in the Delta’s militant networks, UG is acutely aware of the missed opportunity he has had with regard to making it big through the Post Amnesty Programme. Seeing many youth, some of whom had been much lower in the militant pecking order or who in fact were not even involved with militancy but had somehow acquired the status as a result of connections to all sorts of patrons, make personal strides, fills him with both consternation and pride. He is proud that the sacrifices they made had at least brought some measure of advancement to the personal lives of many youth within the region. He is however bitter that

he himself had not been able to make much of the Amnesty. Even though he was enrolled and got to travel to South Africa for training, his personal circumstance does not seem to have changed much. This material deficit, coupled with his advancing age, places him squarely in the over- age youth category.

Anthropologists have often argued that age is one of the many ways in which people produce and inhabit social time (James & Milles 2005, Johnson-Hanks 2006, Cole 2010, Meiu 2014). For the over-age youth in Yenagoa's ex-militant networks however, age appears to be a major constraint if it is not accompanied by other indices of social maturation like financial independence. Indeed, becoming over-age within youth networks is linked to new constraints to social maturation and inhibits the movement of affected persons into *Alaowei* status. Over-age youth inhabit a space where notions of failed masculinities are particularly evident, a kind of limbo in which the 'temporalities of ageing' (Meiu 2014: 4) as well as the reality of poverty conspire to subvert the respectability many had attained during the heady days of violent militancy. The Post amnesty period represents for many over-age youth in the Delta, the type of space Nauja Kleist (2010) described in the case of diaspora Somali men in London and Copenhagen. Kleist describes their attempts to negotiate respectable masculinity in the context of displacement in these Western cities. Here, the inability of Somali diaspora men to maintain old systems of recognition and privilege is deepened by a gendered empowerment of women in the West, thus creating acute feelings of failed masculinity which is over compensated for by the creation of 'alternative social spaces of recognition in which respectable masculinity can be re-enacted' (Kleist 2010: 187).

For individual actors like UG, the possibility of re-enacting the old measures of respectability, which were of course violent, has also been put paid to by the Amnesty through its relentless demand for peace. They are thus left to create versions of masculine respectability that is legitimated by their violent past but dependent on their ability to maintain links with far more materially successful and often younger/junior comrades. The transition is far from an easy one for the over-age youth who, having failed to become social adults, have to circulate within youth spaces; claiming the 'high table' at meetings or becoming 'patrons'. UG explained this by saying that during the 2003-9 violence, he had no fear, that if he wanted to do anything, he just did it. Now however, according to him, his 'only fear is age' (UG int 2014). He does have a reason to fear ageing. Having made little money from the DDR process of the Amnesty, he is still too poor to claim his place within the Ijaw National Congress (INC), which is the parent

body for the IYC but has become too old to participate fully in the IYC. In order to retain a hold on old respect, UG and people of his generation have become latter day peace advocates who try to shape the respectability debate away from violence, wealth and consumption. They call to values like consistency, philanthropy, integrity as new sites of respectability and attempt to steer the more privileged youth towards it. It is evident, that even when they are not exactly conscious of this social tactic, they are articulating tactical agency in ways that allow them to re-invent themselves in order to cope with the changing nature of the post amnesty Niger Delta as well as its implications for youth politics. UG's personal story highlights the dilemma faced by the so-called over-age youth. He expresses many of these sentiments when he told me, in relation to keeping younger militants in check:

You know the type of people you are talking about, most of them are stark illiterates. For you to assemble such people together its not easy. You know for we the Ijaw, Ijaw means truth. Anything we do, we like to apply that truth. We must be truthful in all that we do. We also have the Egbesu, the god that will punish you if you do something wrong. The moment you steal or rape, you will die. You must be pure. We even fast, sometimes you can't eat food prepared by a woman or sleep with a woman; you must be pure. It's not easy. There must always be a repercussion for bad behaviour. There is wide discipline in the camps, otherwise you can't control them. That is why people can be guided.

He also highlights the new forms of respectability the so-called over-youth category consistently tries to create when he told me, in response to the question 'how would a youth earn respect?' that:

Respect is not just fighting about or showing off with money. Some people just have money, but you have to believe in something. You can't be going about just because of money. Your relationship with people is what matters most. If someone dies today, it's not the cars or money that makes someone cry, it is the relationship he has with people. To be respected, you have to build trust with people around you. In South Africa they have a slang they call Ubuntu. It has three legs, which symbolizes respect, communalization, and ...I forgot the third one. But you see that no matter what you do, someone can tell something about your life style. That is when you begin to get respect from people, command. If you keep to your words, people will trust you. Like Jesus Christ [said] 'silver and gold I have none'. I go to places to buy things, they don't know my house, but they give me things on credit, because they know I will pay back. That is

why I say my name anywhere I go. Some of these boys have made money, so they don't know how to be good people. We the old ones must teach them. That's the way.

This value set is fundamentally different from that of everyday militant youth who seem to prioritize violence as well as conspicuous consumption. Indeed, it is a major shift from UG's own admitted values in the years when he himself was an everyday rather than 'over-age' youth for whom violence and its performance were key to respectability. These dramatic changes in the notion of respectability as well as the specific social situations of those who champion one version or the other, justifies the conceptualization of respect as a site of contestation and highlights one of the most important dynamic of youth politics in Post Amnesty Niger Delta.

It would appear that mid-level commanders in Delta militias occupy very similar social positions as that described by Themner (2012:205-23) in the case of Liberia and Sierra Leone. Their struggles for respect are intimately bound up in the very nature of post-conflict peace-building projects that tend to focus on the co-option of two levels of youth militias –the most senior commanders and the foot soldiers. This deepens the challenge of post-conflict transitions for mid-level commanders who often lose their authority as well as sense of self worth and respectability. The story of UG however shows that social networks can often recreate themselves in an attempt to respond to these challenges.

### **Temporality, contingency and Youth Mobilization in the oil Delta**

To participate in the complex landscape of youth politics and social resistance in the Niger Delta, actors have to become *Alaowei* or at least perform it. This burden of becoming Alaowei however does not rest solely on individual youth. In order to attract followership, Delta gangs also have to demonstrate the ability to endow members with the respectability. It is interesting to note that in post Amnesty Niger Delta, partly as a consequence of the dynamics of temporality and the consequent changes to how respectability is defined as the UG case shows, militant Delta gangs have lost significant elements of their pull effect and attractiveness to youth. The Amnesty appears to have created a social environment in which social mobilization is increasingly dependent not on the old logics of network building but on new ones which emphasize spontaneity and contingency as well as one's place in time.

One particularly important element of collective organisation and social violence in the Niger Delta that is hardly ever taking into account is the role that fortuitous, sudden and provisional actions or events play in generating these popular movements. It is often taken for granted that

grievances or motivations for political action are rooted in the turbulent history of the region and that social categories (especially youth) constantly respond to cues from years of state neglect and marginalisation. Yet, contingent and provisional actions are sometimes at the core of social mobilisation and those other affinities are tools deployed by youth in the service of tactical agency. What is obvious from the literature though is that contingency is notably ignored by analysts in spite of considerable evidence that it is a pervasive form of organizing in the region.

But what do we mean when we talk of contingency or of contingent networks? A few things come to mind. The first is the role of ‘chance’, ‘spontaneity’ or ‘unpredictability’. Making a living or simply surviving within spaces where state presence is at best weak, infrastructure is inadequate and in which multiple social formations compete to impose alternative visions of citizenship often requires delicate social navigation skills that thrive on its spontaneity, flexibility and adaptability (Evans & Furlong 1997, Vigh 2009). Often unacknowledged in studies of the Delta conflict is the implication of this fluid context for social action. Framing youth politics and collective mobilization through contingency indicates an acknowledgement that historical identities, important as they are, often require contemporary triggers that transform deep seated emotions into political action. It is the unpredictability of what this trigger would be or when it would come that is ‘contingent’.

This leads to another important aspect of contingency which is temporality already touched on in the previous section. In order for a social action to be ‘contingent’ it has to happen within a specific temporal space in which it is able to fundamentally shape the direction of individual life choices and ultimately of group action. As Doug and Sewell (2001) put it, it is really ‘about time’. In that 2001 article, Doug and Sewell make a case for the timing of fortuitous events and conclude that in order for contentious social action to even occur at all, the time must be right for it in that it must occur when it is able to feed off enabling social structures (towards collective organising, shared sense of grievance and actionable goal). Temporality in this sense also indicates elements of chance and unpredictability.

Finally, the fact that the initial provisional action occurs does not necessarily mean that a contingent network can emerge. For instance, in order for outrage over the self immolation of the Tunisian fruit seller, Tareq Mohammed Boazizi<sup>3</sup> to grow into the kind of coordinated

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<sup>3</sup> Tareq Bouazizi was a College graduate who eked out a living as a fruit seller in the small town of Sidi Bouzid in Tunisia. On December 17th 2010, he was accosted by police for allegedly selling fruit without a license. His

protest movement that became the *Arab Spring*, provisional individual or group responses must be able to morph into what Beissinger (2011: 26) described as ‘interrelated contingencies [in other words] a linkchain of events in which the outcome of one link became an important initial condition for another’. Contingency is therefore not just about unpredictability but it also highlights that sometimes there is no opposition between spontaneity and organization and that youth networks often have to combine these two features in a continuous iteration that helps them create social organizations that are simultaneously nimble and fixed.

As a tool for and a form of social mobilization in the Niger Delta, networks emerging out of contingent relationships and provisional actions are fairly potent. The *Colombia* neighbourhood of Port Harcourt provides an interesting illustration of how this occurs. The neighbourhood that local youth refer to as ‘*Colombia*’, partly, I am told, in reference to what they consider its similarities to the violent drug driven reputation of the Latin American state itself, comprises of residential streets officially known as Victoria, Niger and Bende. These streets are densely populated and teem with large populations of young men many of which belonged to the Agaba socio-cultural group. The heart is at Niger and Bende streets which had between them, in the years before Amnesty was offered in 2009, a large open playground called the ‘Number One Field’ that became a hub for drug dealing, gang hangouts and violent clashes. This open field was bound on one side by small temporary wooden shacks where young women sold bottles of locally made gin, fish pepper soup and sex. Close to the field was a large brothel called the Romeo Night Club which provided more permanent fixtures for illicit transactional sex and drug dealing. Young people gathered there every evening to hang out and of course do all sorts of illegal activities within a space that offered relative protection from the law. Underneath the criminal, chaotic and tough façade of *Colombia* was a highly complex system of collective organization, social order and mutual support that prided itself in its precarity and thrived on its distance from formal authority. The Number One Field itself was a relic of a previous attempt by the state government to provide sports infrastructure for local youth that was later abandoned in the late 1980s as the pressure of structural adjustment began to bear

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wares were confiscated including his electronic weighing scale. The humiliation of the arrest and the refusal of the town governor to meet with him or redress the situation caused him to douse himself with paint thinner and set himself on fire. His self immolation triggered massive protests that caused the overthrow of governments across the Middle East.

down on the fiscal health of the government. The economic improvements since the return of civilian rule has however resuscitated the project, and the open spaces which were the center of the *Colombia* life being described here have since been reclaimed by the government. The stories that relate directly to the open field that adjoins the Niger-Bende streets are therefore the recollections of community members who were active in the area from about 1995 to 2009.

*Colombia* was a space where young people created alternate cultures and realities, driving out as far as they could, the reach of the state as well as traditional notions of social order, normality and respectability. *Colombia* illustrates the way social groups can, according to Routledge (1997: 70), 'endow space with amalgams of different meanings, uses and values'. Indeed, to all intents and purposes, the very name *Colombia* indicated acute awareness of the transnational implications of urban violence and instability that few societies encapsulated better in the 1990s than the narcotics and corruption fuelled violence of the period in the real Colombia.

In spite of the violent façade of *Colombia*, it was a rowdy fun place to be for many youth and it naturally attracted police attention, much of it benign. Occasionally however, the informal circulation of police becomes formal state raids on the area. It was during one of these raids that the police came in to break up a scuffle and wounded Gowon, who was the defacto gang leader in the neighbourhood. As the story went, upon return from the hospital, Gowon brought together disparate informal groups of youth from adjoining streets, including Victoria, Bende and a few from Creek Road and formed what they called 'OX'. That fortuitous Christmas attack on *Colombia* by police triggered a series of events which played a role in shaping the Delta's gang universe into what it is today and illustrates the role of contingency in youth mobilization.

As noted above, the fact of contingency does not divorce specific trigger events from the social universe in which they occur. As Marx wrote in the case of the proletarian revolution, movements usually rise gradually and that rise culminates (inevitably he avers) in a revolution which is tied irrevocably to the historic unfolding and deepening of the inherent contradictions of capitalism (see McAdam and Sewell 2001: 90). This means that even when we identify trigger events, they still need to be situated in history (Laterza 2015, Phillips 2016). To illustrate in this context, the police raid that led to injury to Gowon was not, by itself, an unexpected event in *Colombia*, the rest of the Delta or in fact Nigeria more generally. In fact, police harassment of *Colombia* youth was such a regular occurrence that one of the residents of the neighbourhood at the time described young people as Automated Teller Machines from which police drew bribes whenever they felt like it. Why then was this particular event of

particular significance and why did it trigger Beissinger's (2011) so called 'link-chain of events' that eventually created a viable, vibrant and constantly evolving resistance network? One key factor was that unlike other raids in which unofficial arrests were made by the police, often with minimal violence, and in which the arrested youth were simply roughed up for small bribes and released almost immediately, this particular raid turned violent very quickly. As it was described by Louis (int 2014),

the police always came here. That was normal, especially during a carnival or any party. They always showed up to take money from the boys. You know how these things are! That day however some boys from Diobu were there and they didn't really know the police people. you know some of them were not in uniform. The Diobu boys thought it was Axe men (a violent cult group based mainly in the Universities) or something, so they began to fight them. As Gowon tried to intervene to resolve the matter, one of the police men hit him with his gun, everything just scattered after then.

It appears that had the youth from outside *Colombia* not been present at that event, the police raid could be expected to have ended the way the many previous ones had- a minor shakedown and rapid return to normalcy. The resistance put up by the non- *Colombia* youth could have caused a fracas more intense than usual, but was perhaps not enough, on its own, to have triggered the reaction to create a more institutionalised form of resistance that Gowon and his acolytes created soon after the incident. It is perhaps conceivable that if Gowon himself had not been attacked and seriously injured by the police, the dynamics of their (*Colombia* youth) precarious but obviously stable relations with law enforcement would not have changed so fundamentally to the point that violence became an acceptable tool for communication.

But perhaps most instructive is the broader context of the police raid and what was going on within the Niger Delta around that time. From 1993, the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP) had reignited the debate about resource and environmental rights in the oil producing region and there was growing resentment of the repressive response of the military government of General Sani Abacha. By the time of the *Colombia* incident sometime around 1995, Ogoni was in turmoil following the arrest of Ken Saro-Wiwa and others for alleged complicity in the murder of four Ogoni elders. Of course these Saro-Wiwa incidents did not happen in *Colombia*, but it had profound impact on the narratives of citizenship and belonging in the entire Delta region (and perhaps even across the country). What is significant was that the police raid on *Colombia* occurred at a time when the repressive apparatus of the

Nigerian State was generating intense public resentment and the MOSOP example was highlighting both the precarity of resistance as well as its necessity and inevitability. It is also important to note that there was a long history of social change and resistance to the state especially with regard to minority rights and the questions surrounding the fair distribution of oil revenue in the region and thus even the MOSOP movement prevailing at the time was not occurring in a vacuum. Louis (int 2014) alluded to the influence of the Ogoni movement for the way leaders of the *Colombia* gangs framed what was a relatively common occurrence. In his words,

Everyone was tired of the army people, just harassing everybody and the police beating people up. You know that time was Abacha time? You remember NADECO<sup>4</sup> and all the problem with Saro Wiwa? You see, all that taught us a thing or two.

While some studies of social action tend to argue that movements are responsive to sudden dramatic disruptions in people's lives which supposedly motivates them to seek a restoration of more acceptable orders (see Gurr 1971, Turner & Killian 1972), in finding an explanation for the response of *Colombia* youth to police harassment, it is useful to combine the relevance of the moment (the specific police attack) with that of history. Contingency emerges precisely from the fortuitous combination of the present and history as demonstrated in the establishment of *Colombia*'s OX and subsequent years of violence against the police, and each other.

Laterza's (2015) analysis of spontaneous labour strike in the town of Enkopolwani in Swaziland draws on Polanyi (1944) to argue for a similar connection between provisional action and the established order for popular organization. He notes that political actions (in this case labour strikes) 'take place in the wider political context of contestation over the conventional forms of representative democracy. They are one important symptom of this crisis, further highlighting the general feeling of workers and citizens that post-colonial (or post-apartheid) states have not delivered the general improvements in livelihood and well-being that were expected after liberation, nor did they curb the exploitative effects of regional and global capital investment' Laterza (2015:138). The implications of this connection between history and temporality is further illuminated by the discussions around the co-relevance of

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<sup>4</sup> The National Democratic Coalition (NADECO) was one of the main pro-democracy groups challenging the annulment of the June 12 1993 Presidential Election by the military and which continued to oppose General Sani Abacha's dubious transition programme.

uncertainty and stability. Describing this relationship in the context of Bissauian society, Henrik Vigh (2009: 421) argues that:

‘This is not to suggest that everything in Bissau is adrift and afloat. There are, in fact a multitude of both cultural and social institutions that seem relatively stable and enduring, one of which, ironically, is the existential uncertainty caused by the dire economic situation and political unrest’. He goes on further to note that ‘Bissau is a world of uncertainty, of anticipated yet uncontrollable difficulties and hardship’ (Vigh 2009: 422).

The key here is that the uncertainty is anticipated, yet hard to control, indicating that it has become the context of life rather than a temporary rupture. It is precisely in this sort of dynamic that temporality and history interact and are able to generate social actions capable of reproducing patterns of social relations or of rupturing them in profound ways. It is important to note that there have been many moments like the one described above in Port Harcourt and around the Niger Delta more generally. The presence of these multiple contingent moments however does not do damage to the point being made here, nor does it undermine contingency as a useful analytical tool for thinking about the Niger Delta or similar contexts. Indeed, multiple contingencies are what ultimately create the fluid social universe where constant ruptures, mutations, uncertainties and reconfigurations are central to life and in which Delta youth and their counterparts around similar contexts live in. Scott (1998) makes a similar point about the ebbs and flows of everyday resistance in the Malaysian village of ‘Sedaka’ when he writes that due to the intersection of the multiple factors constituting our social environment, it is ‘always emergent and unfolding’ thus requiring that agents have the ‘capacity to adapt and read capricious environments (Scott 1998: 331).

Youth are adept at these constant adaptations and readings of the volatile social environment in which they have to survive and, where possible, thrive. There are of course very individualized responses to this social environment. However, as Mbembe and Roitman (1995: 324) note, there is also often a ‘regime of subjectivity’ in which one may identify a ‘shared ensemble of imaginary configurations of everyday life, imaginaries which have a material basis and systems of intelligibility’.

## **Conclusion**

As a tool for determining who fits within the social space; what Amit (2015: 12) called ‘an abstract realm where social relationships are imagined and enacted, the story of UG described

above illustrates the importance of respect as a governing idiom in Delta networks. It highlights how individual actors imagine their place within the youthscape as ‘a man’, as ‘a senior man’ or as *Alaowei*. When Pratten (2007), writes of Delta youth reminiscing about ‘the rugged life’ he is in fact articulating how their search for respectability is bound up in the social navigations within an oil political economy that offers few formal opportunities but in which informal opportunities abound.

The biographical material used above also draws attention to the different contexts that frame respectability and teases out the tensions between self framing and social expectation. This tension is partly why studying respectability is so important to understanding the Niger Delta’s youth networks. Wright Mills (2000) makes a similar point about these sorts of tensions in his classic work ‘*The Sociological Imagination*’ when he argued that illuminating the relationships between changing social structures and the personal challenges that individuals encounter in their context was the worthwhile task of social analysis.

It is also apparent from the above that one of the major consequences of social uncertainty is that a global sense of contingency is imposed as well as generated by the struggles of youth. The *spontaneous* and the *provisional* seem to respond specifically and efficiently to the unpredictable nature of urban life. This is especially magnified in the postcolony as demonstrated by Simone’s (2004) interesting study of cross African case studies. It is however not simply that these types of relationships are useful but perhaps more important is that they are absolutely critical to the tactical agency of youth and without contingent skills, it is difficult to navigate the multiple uncertainties that they are daily confronted with. The need to improvise often opens up opportunities for both conflict and cooperation, for building bridges as well as walls and for creating as well as tearing down.

The constant youth movements within the moral universe imposed by notions of respectability is achieved in large part by the tactical imperative of contingent networking. In short, contingency is the tactic while respectability is the goal. The ability to creatively and constantly adapt to a fluid alternative universe while maintaining useful connections to the moorings of old traditions or authorities is a trait many have identified in those Asef Bayat (2004) called the ‘informal people’. This adaptability is captured in part by Vigh’s (2009) concept of ‘motion squared’, which, elicits imagery of the earth’s double movement- on its own axis, at the same time as in orbit around the sun. So, while youth have to respond to changing notions of respect, much of which are produced within their social spaces, they have to, at the same time, tactically

engage with the everyday implications of the broader oil economy through adaptable contingent networks. This seems an obvious point in that all social action has elements of this double movement, however in the context of a Delta youth literature that privileges fossilized social categories (youth vs elders; state vs communities; oil extractors vs oil bearers; armed forces vs youth militants and so on), it is an important one.

It, first of all, helps to illuminate more clearly the role that agency plays in the social life of youth. By highlighting how youth express themselves within constantly changing environments, this framework makes it possible to break away from the constricting perspectives of scarcity or of the binary frames of resistance and repression. It recognizes that these factors exist within the social imaginaries as well as in the realities of life for Delta youth, yet, it is able to see beyond them and account for important processes of change. It does this by placing the entire analysis of youth action within the context of constant motion and change, treating both the analytical space as well as the human subjects of research as fluid and changing. With an analytical frame such as this, it becomes untenable to see social positions as unchanging or to ignore the constant reconfigurations of relationships, of networks and indeed of goals that are evident in the Niger Delta. The dominant frameworks of scarcity, resistance and repression that have driven the Niger Delta literature can only effectively capture the broader macro contexts of oil politics but, as shown here, are not as effective when they are applied to everyday social networks around which life is organized in the region and which are the focus of this study. It is in the light of this that this study adopts the sociological and anthropological insights derivable from the interrogation of permanence, uncertainty and navigation as frameworks for thinking about the the Niger Delta's youth networks.

Ultimately, what respectability and contingency show in the Niger Delta is that social mobilization can often depend on factors not directly related to the political and economic issues around which social competition is framed. In the end, the everyday micro-politics of organizations, networks and individuals can be more important to the broader frames of politics than is often acknowledged. The examples of UG and of the making of the OX in *Colombia* provide compelling illustrations of the strength of the everyday and highlight why social accounts of large scale political competitions need to be more attentive to the subtle forms of mobilization that underpin participation.

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