

THE DELTA CREEKS, WOMEN'S ENGAGEMENT AND NIGERIA'S OIL INSURGENCY

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The on-going insurgency in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria continues to have serious consequences for oil workers, corporations and the global oil market. In spite of the growing interest in arguably the greatest existential threat to the Nigerian state since the Civil War of 1967–70, scant scholarly attention has been paid to the Delta creeks and the fundamental roles performed by women in the insurgency. This paper interrogates the space represented by the creeks as the home territory of insurgents in Nigeria's oil-rich Delta. Using interview and focus group data garnered from 42 insurgents and five other sets of actors, I analyse the operational significance and symbolism of the creeks and its processual social sorting. In addition, I demonstrate the dichotomous relationship of women to the creeks. Women constitute a major source of reconnaissance, spiritual fortification, among other roles, but are concurrently considered eewo or abomination by male insurgents. Although academic analysis has been overwhelmingly concerned with the supportive roles and non-violent protests of women, the Delta women are actively engaged in the on-going violent repertoires of protest.

Keywords: Niger Delta, insurgency, oil struggle, Nigerian women, Niger Delta creeks

Introduction

Crude oil has fuelled worsening social relations in Nigeria since its discovery in Oloibiri in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria in 1956 (Oyefusi 2008; 2007). The oil-producing communities have seen little beyond violence, state repression, squalor, unemployment and pervasive neglect (Oyefusi 2008; Ibeanu and Luckham 2007; Okereke 2006; Okonta 2005; Human Rights Watch 2002). Following the hanging of nine environmental justice activists, including Ken Saro-Wiwa in 1995 by the General Sani Abacha administration, several insurgent groups have been engaging in a range of rebellious and (quasi)-criminal activities like hot-tapping, illegal oil bunkering, pipeline vandalism and flow station shutdown. By 2003, kidnappings became rampant (Okaba 2009) and, in more recent times, bombings have become quite common. In particular, the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), a loose coalition of insurgent groups involved in the most spectacular bombings and kidnapping of oil workers, claims these acts signpost protest against the Nigerian state and oil corporations exploiting their communities' natural resources without providing adequate compensation.¹ MEND claims to be part of the larger social movement that began in the Delta in the 1960s, which aims to gain resource control for the Delta people. They claim that kidnappings and other egregious acts constitute repertoires to fight for the rights of the people.

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¹MEND's Jomo Gbomo official e-mail statement (Number 14) 'Chevron Makaraba Pipeline Attacks', 9 January 2010.

On 11 January 2006, four foreign oil workers were kidnapped in an attack on a Shell Petroleum Development Corporation (SPDC, hereafter, Shell) oil facility in Rivers state by MEND. This incident shocked the Nigerian state and the oil industry because it was the first clear indication that insurgents had acquired the capacity to attack oil facilities and personnel offshore. Four days later, seven soldiers died in an attack on Shell facilities in Port Harcourt (Technical Committee on the Niger Delta 2008). By December 2006, 70 oil workers were kidnapped (Bergen Risk Solutions 2007). In 2007, 167 oil workers were kidnapped, while, in 2008, 57 were captured (Bergen Risk Solutions 2008). In more recent times, 59 oil workers were kidnapped in 2009; at the end of June 2010, 31 had been kidnapped by insurgents (Bergen Risk Solutions 2010).² While insurgents and oil corporations are generally silent about the ransom paid to secure the release of the oil workers, the popular name—'ATM'—given to white oil workers from the geo-political West is an insignia of the times: the release of each of the expatriates costs an average of \$250,000.³ The oil industry in Nigeria collectively spent at least \$3 billion on security annually at the height of insurgent activities between 2007 and 2009.⁴ The \$200 million donation to the federal government in February 2011 is only a fraction of the budget of oil corporations for ensuring the safety of their personnel and facilities. Against the backdrop of upheaval in the Middle East, the effects of the insurgency in the Delta go beyond Nigeria and sub-Saharan Africa.

Research, however, has yet to uncover the import of the social space represented by the creeks in the course of episodic kidnappings and other acts by insurgents in the Niger Delta. Hobsbawm (1959; 1969), it appears, was ahead of his time in articulating the functionality of certain spaces—mountainous regions, waterways and creeks—for the rise and maturation of social banditry. For instance, in Italy, where kidnapping is arguably an overdeveloped phenomenon (see Jenkins 1985), the geographical terrain of Sardinia serves as a major driving force (Caramazza and Leone 1984). This paper contributes to the growing scholarly interest in Nigeria's oil insurgency (see Courson 2011; Watts 2007; Okonta 2006) by interrogating the Delta creeks—where insurgent acts are hatched and executed—and the dichotomous relationship of women to the creeks, which are generally dominated by men.

This paper is divided into three parts. First, I describe the data and methods of this study. Second, I explicate the first-order significance of the creeks in kidnapping episodes. I interrogate the creeks in an attempt to provide an understanding of its 'symbolic transformation' (Lofland 1973: 140) from a public space—albeit a remote disattended one—into a conscientiously securitized space that serves an operational, socio-cultural, economic, religious and even psychological function for the insurgents. Third, in explicating the roles of women in the insurgency, I demonstrate their dual relationship to the creeks. On one hand, women constitute a major source of reconnaissance, spiritual fortification, amongst others, but are concurrently considered *eewo* or abomination by male insurgents. I argue that, although scholarly attention has been overwhelmingly concerned with the supportive roles and non-violent protests of women,

²The gradual decline in the number of kidnapped oil workers is largely due to the introduction of an amnesty programme by the government of the late President Shehu Musa Yar'Adua in August 2009. Insurgents were required to submit their arms in exchange for state pardon and rehabilitation. For more on the amnesty programme, see Davidheiser and Nyiayaana (2011).

³See Matthew Harwood (undated), 'Perils Amid Profits in the Niger Delta', available online at www.securitymanagement.com/article/perils-amid-profits-niger-delta.

⁴See Alike (2011).

the Delta women are actively engaged in the on-going violent repertoires of protest in various capacities as gun-runners, combatants, mediators and emissaries of insurgents, amongst others.

Data and Methods

The data for this paper are derived from a larger study, 'Criminal Resistance? The Politics of Kidnapping of Oil Workers in Nigeria'. The rich sources of data provide considerable latitude to investigate the space represented by the creeks and how women are positioned. This is a multi-actor research involving six sets of participants. They include community members (men and women over 18 years), political and environmental justice activists, representatives of relevant NGOs and insurgents undergoing rehabilitation under the aegis of the federal government of Nigeria amnesty programme. The programme was launched in 2009 and guarantees state pardon for insurgents who laid down their arms at the expiration of the deadline in October 2009. Other participants include journalists and military authorities at the Joint Task Force (JTF). The JTF is the military unit responsible for securing oil infrastructure and operations in the Delta. In total, 114 persons were interviewed or participated in focus group discussions. I conducted 42 interviews and 13 FGDs. Nineteen of the interviewees and 23 FGD participants are ex-insurgents. The FGDs varied in size from a minimum of two participants to nine. Seventy-two persons participated in 13 FGDs. These include 23 ex-insurgents in five FGDs, seven editorial board members of a major newspaper in Nigeria and over 50 people drawn from Agge, an oil-producing community in Bayelsa state.

In addition, I draw on a very fascinating dataset: official e-mails from Jomo Gbomo, MEND's spokesperson. The author is one of only 50 persons or organizations receiving these e-mails around the world. The listserv includes media organizations such as al-Jazeera, the *Financial Times* of London, South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC), Bergen Risk Solutions, Sahara Reporters, Reuters, Bloomberg News, *Newswatch*, the *Daily Trust* and *Next Newspapers* of Nigeria, and scholars like Michael Watts of the University of California Berkeley, amongst others.

Interrogating the Delta Creeks

Various spaces are imbued with seemingly unfettered powers to enthrone different types of belonging. By design, spaces can include or exclude certain kinds of people in a largely non-verbal but mutually intelligible way. In spite of the liberal democratic guarantee of legal access to all (see Lofland 1973), not all public spaces attract everyone to the same degree. In everyday interactions, as Lefebvre (in Brenner and Elden 2009: 190) points out, 'spatial relations also are social relations'. Sicakkan (2005: 4–5) highlights four types of spaces and the character of belonging they create. First, there are *essentialized spaces* based on ethnic and religious forms of belonging. Second, *national spaces* derive their belonging from citizenship of a nation-state.⁵ The relationship between essentialized and national spaces is symbiotic (Sicakkan 2005). This is hardly contestable, as the capacity of nationalist sentiments *qua* rhetoric and commonality of ancestral

⁵Largely implied by Sicakkan (2005).

homeland to generate non-inclusive orthodoxy requires no introduction. Third, there are *transnational spaces* that are unencumbered by any particular territory or socio-political organization. Transnational spaces are about people or humanity in general. Finally, there are *glocal spaces*, which welcome all modes of belongings. 'Glocal spaces accommodate essentialized belongings, national and transnational modes of belonging, and new types of belonging which are inspired and informed by the idea of diverse society. Glocal spaces entail a variety of *local incipient forms of all-inclusive organizations*' (Sicakkan 2005: 5, italics).

The space represented by the creeks is not a *glocal space*, in which all belong and can participate; it is a fundamentally and unabashedly *essentialized space* based on ethnic, religious and linguistic forms of belonging and identity. Consequently, apart from serving as repository for kidnap victims, one of the primary functions of the creeks is dispensing a multilayered regimen of social sorting. Insurgents rely on *appeariential ordering*, or the notion that people's identities are 'written all over them' (Lofland 1973: 49). This is not simply an aesthetic consideration, but a matter of life and death for insurgents as well as targets that possess impressive ransom value. Therefore, a discriminatory regime of differences (see Sennett 2002) or *spatial segregation of persons* (Lofland 1973: 78) based on skin colour, language and ethnicity is, in effect, in the creeks. Those who are black, Nigerian, Niger Deltan and Ijaw-speaking⁶ have lower chances of being kidnapped. Therefore, being non-black in particular means being 'foreign' and belonging to the dangerous consignment referred to as 'oyibo'—literally white person—but also discursively regarded as 'meddling alien'. This category includes Americans, French, Canadians, British, Italians as well as the Chinese, Filipinos, Lebanese and Indians. This suggests a twisted form of multiculturalism and equal ethnic opportunity for 'kidnappability'.

As the Delta space has been designated highly inflammable for at least two decades (see Watts 2004), insurgents use their biophysical knowledge of what a Niger Deltan looks like—or appeariential ordering—and the order afforded by space (see Lofland 1973) to make a distinction between strangers and Delta indigenes. The strangers—foreign oil workers and other non-Deltans—who choose to remain in the Delta in spite of numerous warnings⁷ by insurgents are construed as people who are benefitting from the oil industry. For prospective insurgents at the Niger Delta Freedom Fighters (NDFF) creeks in Edo state, for instance, a reference from someone in the echelons of the insurgency is required as well as a clear demonstration in a ritualized interview that the interested individual knows what the struggle is about and is ready to lose his life or limb for the cause.⁸

The character of the symbolic transformation of the creeks in the Niger Delta is signifiatory of what I call, first, the *ita eewo* or abominable space and, second, the *ita ominira* or freedom space. This space is *eewo* (abomination) to non-Nigerians, non-Deltans and uninitiated Deltans. Although there is no record of deaths of kidnap victims in the hands of insurgents, the level of human suffering they experience while in captivity is high. In addition, there is the risk of dying from stray bullets in the regular confrontations

⁶The Ijaws are the largest among the minority ethnic groups in the Delta region. Most of the MEND insurgents are drawn from the Ijaws (see Okonta 2006). In some cases, Ijaw insurgents admit non-Ijaws like the Urhobo into their groups.

⁷One of such warnings is the Kaiama Declaration issued by Ijaw youths in 1998. Oil corporations and their workers were asked to leave the Niger Delta by December 1998. See Ijaw Youths of the Niger Delta (1998).

⁸Interviewee 19.

between the JTF and insurgents. One kidnap victim, for instance, died of a gunshot wound during the JTF bombardment of Gbaramatu kingdom in May 2009 aimed at destroying the notorious 'Camp 5' established by a former MEND overall Commander, Mr Government Ekpemupolo, widely known as 'Tompson'.

For the JTF, the creeks are no less of an abominable (*eewo*) space. As the home territory (see Lofland 1973) of insurgents, the JTF understands that the creeks have been effectively colonized by insurgents. The *eewo* status of the creeks is intensified vis-à-vis the JTF because it is the fortress for repelling any attacks by outsiders, particularly the Nigerian state, that the JTF represents. The creeks constitute an uncharted dangerous territory for the military.⁹ When insurgents attacked a couple of offshore oil wells owned by Agip at Forcados in one incident, 11 soldiers lost their lives (Technical Committee on the Niger Delta 2008). In another operation in 2009, Tompolo's Camp, five insurgents killed 18 soldiers. The exact number of soldiers who have lost their lives at the creeks while guarding oil infrastructure is a closely guarded secret in military circles but the JTF Commander General Sarkin Yaki Bello assures that 'you'll be amazed at the number of military personnel and security personnel that have been killed'.¹⁰

The creeks in contrast represent *ita ominira* or freedom space for the insurgents. The symbolic elasticity inherent in the social space represented by the creeks is overwhelmingly appealing to insurgents. Away from the intimidating presence of the JTF, the suffocating strictures of traditions guarded mostly by old men, the drudgery of unemployment and tedium of poverty, insurgents transform the creeks to a citadel of refuge. It is a space that marks their rejection of domination and oppression, and asserts their masculinity, symbolically and in reality. The endless peripateticism of males, who believe they cannot be full men within the unequal conventional structures of the Nigerian society, finds momentary rest and a voice.

In addition, this space is a theatre of performativity. The creeks represent a social space for self-expression. It is the arena for rendering folkloric songs, dances, savouring moments with peers of similar orientation, sharing feelings of brotherhood fabricated by having stared death in the face together and narrating panoramic hopes of a better future. The songs, dances and costumes transpose everyday young men from rural fishing and farming communities in the Delta to *Erujeje* or fearsome personality. The performances instil fear and dread in the uninitiated public.

However, *ominira* (freedom) at the creeks contains two antithetical forces: *idera* (comfort) and *inira* (discomfort). *Idera* at the creeks manifests in the highest ideals and the vilest of vices. The ideals of a free Niger Delta and genuinely democratic Nigeria as well as railings against global capital exist side by side with unqualified access to kai-kai, ogo-goro (local gin), relatively cheap money from insurgent exploits and consumption of banned substances like marijuana. Ironically, the creeks also symbolize *inira* (discomfort) for insurgents. The mosquito bites, poor water sources and inadequate supply of food and other necessities indicate that life at the creeks is challenging. Hostages are not intended to die and therefore have to be securely kept and fed. For insurgents, the struggle makes the discomfort tolerable.

The atmosphere at the creeks is awe-inspiring. On Friday 27 August 2010, I visited the Niger Delta Freedom Fighters (NDFF) or 'Egbema 1' camp in Edo state. I was in the

⁹Interviewee 10.

¹⁰Interviewee 12; General Bello, Commander JTF. Personal interview, Yenagoa, Bayelsa state, August 2010.

company of notable persons in the insurgency. One of them was Henry Bindodogha, the founder of the NDFF. An affiliate of MEND, the NDFF became famous in 2007 when they kidnapped four Americans working for Global Services, an oil servicing firm contracted to Chevron Nigeria Limited.¹¹ Bindodogha accepted the government's amnesty offer and was appointed Senior Special Assistant to the Edo state Governor on Surveillance and Waterways Security.¹² We boarded the \$44,000 Edo state government boat—one of Bindodogha's official vehicles. We travelled for over one hour on the waterways in addition to the nearly two hours on the ground. The atmosphere at the camp was intimidating. The camp was in a forest serviced by waterways that occasionally got blocked by debris. It was clear that a community of insurgents once lived there, that a counter-culture once thrived there in a manner similar to the urban studies of the famous Chicago School (see Shaw and McKay 1971; Whyte 1943; Thrasher 1927). I wrote the following in my field note about the visit to the creeks:

Finally, we entered the hallowed waterways. A guy right in front of Bindodogha did libation: He touched the water three times and sprinkled some on us all three times. It was to show respect to the gods. The Egbema 1 creeks were before our eyes. We got in and saw many intriguing things. There was the burnt camp house and the jail house, where errant boys were kept for weeks until they confessed. There was the shrine, where Egbesu, the god of war was represented in symbols made of red cloth We saw where the four hostages that shot the Egbema 1 camp into limelight were kept We stood where the hostages were kept. We saw the kitchen, playground, etc of the boys. The eeriness of the place was numbing. This is not a place for the faint-hearted.

The creeks are symbolically transformed to a transcendental space. There are five major ways in which the creeks represent a mystical space in the insurgency. First, the creeks are largely beyond the reach of the Nigerian state in whose jurisdiction they fall. The institutionalized legal system of the Nigerian state as well as its appurtenances like the criminal codes, the police and the courts is suspended, hence not applicable at the creeks. At the NDFF creeks, a policeman serving as the security detail to Henry Bindodogha was confined to the fringes of the creeks though all other non-uniformed persons gained entry. It was interesting to note that the policeman's uniform still made him suspect and unwelcome at the creeks, although he was Bindodogha's bodyguard and often spent long hours at his home outside the creeks ensuring he was well protected.¹³

Suspending the laws and the entire criminal justice system of the Nigerian state may connote lawlessness at the creeks. However, such a group 'tends to develop its own standards of conduct by which it seeks to regulate and control the behaviour of its members. It inflicts punishment upon those who violate its rules and rewards those who are loyal and conform' (Shaw and McKay 1971: 275). Anderson's (1999: 33) research on 'the code of the street' exemplifies the salience of these informal rules, particularly in street culture and the incidence of interpersonal violence. Such rules typically evolve over time and space. They guide the activities of street gangs (see Brookman *et al.* 2011; Adamson 1998), the mafia (Paoli 2003), inmate groups (Shoham 2010) and other criminal sub-cultures. A study of over a dozen memoirs of former Mafiosi, for instance, highlights the

¹¹For more on this kidnapping episode, see 'American Hostages to FG: It's Inhuman to Treat Niger-Deltans this Badly!', *Saturday Vanguard*, 19 May 2007, pp. 1, 5.

¹²The seemingly seamless incorporation of wanted 'criminals' into the body politick is the focus of another paper.

¹³Another basis for the police officer's exclusion could have been that he was not from the Niger Delta, but neither was I.

cultural roots of the Mafia, which promote solidarity, the pervasive code of silence or *omerta* and the dire consequences of breaking the code (Firestone 1993). For Russian inmates in Israel's prisons, tattoos are a fundamental part of the group life and are inscribed on the bodies of members to reflect class hierarchy, intransigence, opposition to mainstream authority and other values of the criminal subculture (Shoham 2010). The consequences for breaching the tattoo hierarchy or bearing a 'stolen' tattoo may be death in the hands of the gang (Shoham 2010: 991).

Generally, these rules guide the activities of members, ensuring loyalty, respect and honour. They define the boundaries of acceptable behaviour, relations among members and how to handle encounters with individuals from rival groups, security agents and the public. The Delta insurgents have their own unique laws and regulatory framework. For instance, at the NDFC camp in the creeks, women, including insurgents' wives, are not allowed in the camps. This is one of the most serious laws, whose transgression has gruesome consequences. The refusal to allow women at the camp stems from several gendered factors. Insurgents believe that women may create unnecessary distraction, as the boys may compete among themselves to get their attention. This can generate unnecessary rancour and negatively influence morale and camaraderie among the insurgents. In addition, women are believed to be a source of neutralizing the supernatural shield the gods supposedly put on the insurgents. Therefore, should there be sexual interactions between an insurgent and a woman while at the creeks, the former becomes highly vulnerable, as bullets would penetrate his body in any immediate battle. Therefore, only insurgents who are 'off-duty' are allowed to have sexual encounters with women. Before such off-duty, hence, presumably, sexually contaminated insurgents re-enter the camp at the creeks—an elaborate set of rituals including libations and ablution by menopausal women would have to be done to restore the protective armour of the gods.

Other rules at the creeks regulate non-sexual behaviours like stealing, cheating, gambling, laziness, insubordination and so on. Disobedience may mean appearing before the 'Commander', his representative or anyone next in the hierarchy as a form of improvised judicial system. Anyone found guilty is sent to the prison at the camp made of bamboo trees, leaves and ropes. Such errant persons may also be sent out of the camp for a given period, at which time they do not draw a salary. That way, the moral fabric is maintained at the creeks. Insurgents obey their laws in order to be effective at breaking the mainstream laws. They obey the laws they made to break the laws of the Nigerian state. The creeks are thus an entity within an entity. It is paradoxical but rational. People who foment 'lawlessness' actually follow a set of laws: a code of their own: an insurgency criminal code. Before being abandoned, the NDFC camp at the creeks had an elaborate division of labour. Some insurgents served as cooks, gunmen, drivers, engineers, artistes, religious priests and spies. The organizational finesse in the insurgent group, the painstaking work that goes into running the camps and planning the practical details of every operation are herculean. A considerable level of lawfulness rather than lawlessness is required to do all of these, even though, under the laws of the larger society, the insurgents are lawless persons.

Second, the creeks represent an otherworldly space, as the gods are believed to constitute their surveillance architecture and paraphernalia. At the NDFC camp in the creeks, Egbesu, the Ijaw god of war, is proudly displayed in a shrine erected at a sacrosanct space. The Ijaw people of Nigeria believe that Egbesu is a just deity that helps to implement order and fight against injustice (see Omeje 2005). In Ijaw mythology, those

who beckon on Egbesu must not engage in any act of evil (Omeje 2005). Therefore, elaborate spiritual ceremonies are conducted to purify insurgents before invoking the powers of Egbesu. In this space, there is no room for those who have not been purified by the persons who bear the sceptre of Egbesu. There, Bindodogha performs the necessary spiritual rites, including baths, sprinkling water, incantations, long periods of silent meditation and placement of spiritual objects or charms on his group members. Another insurgent group, the Niger Delta People's Volunteer Force (NDPVF), reputed as the group that began the current wave of kidnapping of oil workers in the Delta,¹⁴ uses an older woman for the same purpose. For reasons I explain later, it is important that the woman is past reproductive age.

Third, the creeks constitute a supra-space, as it is persistently in the minds of the powers that be: the political elite, the JTF, the oil industry, private security companies and the general public. It is not hyperbolic to suggest that the insurgents live the creeks, while the creeks live in the minds of several other actors. As MEND emphasizes, the activities in this space affect global oil prices.¹⁵ Therefore, the impact of this space is felt beyond Nigeria and sub-Saharan Africa. At the height of the insurgency in 2006–09, every country dependent on imported fossil fuels experienced the creeks from the global south to the global north. Such countries felt the impact of the creeks in high gas prices. It is hardly surprising that the United States considers African oil—a major part of it Nigerian in origin—as a commodity of 'strategic national interest' (Klare and Volman 2004: 227). The continued provision of arms and ammunitions to the Nigerian state in its war against insurgents is part of the wider securitization of oil in Nigeria by the American and British governments (Lubeck *et al.* 2007) amid incursion into the Nigerian oil industry by countries like China (see Obi 2008).

Fourth, the creeks represent an ideational space and locus of strategic initiatives for planning insurgent activities: how to generate revenue, sphere of influence of each insurgent group, political consciousness and so on. Included in this category are operational activities like mapping out specific oil infrastructure as targets of attacks. While this seems rather straightforward, it is a complex endeavour that requires putting many factors into consideration. These include what company owns the facility (a foreign-owned one is preferred for maximum publicity), how many workers are present (this must be the right number, depending on the capacity of the insurgents), the national origins of oil workers (again foreigners, particularly Westerners, are preferred) and the presence and number of JTF operatives. This space is used to cross-fertilize ideas, disseminate information and rhetoric conducive to giving rank and file insurgents the motivation to fight against the state and oil corporations.

Fifth, an air of invincibility pervades the atmosphere at the creeks. Insurgents are the lords of the creeks with increasingly significant social and symbolic capital. Several young men, many of whom have little education, have suddenly become celebrities. They are sought after by the local and international media, the elite seeking political power among others. The creeks constitute the space that has made these young men more powerful than mere mortals. The creeks offer an atmosphere of significance beyond the backgrounds of the young men, their level of education and other disadvantages of their social demographic. Well sought for interviews as a kind of nouveau local

¹⁴Interviewee 15, NDPVF armourer and the Chief of Staff to Asari Dokubo.

¹⁵MEND's Jomo Gbomo official e-mail statement (Number 13) 'Terrorist Attempt on Delta Flight 253', 27 December 2009.

cognoscenti with international appeal, insurgents know that the oil-thirsty world leans on every word they utter. Insurgents ensure that they perform for their audience—global television entities and journalists—who brave the dangers by going to the creeks.

Also, the creeks constitute the space that affords insurgents the luxury of using force to get whatever they want. Some insurgents who have accepted amnesty rue their inability to use force, as ‘things get done faster when you have a gun’.¹⁶ Thus, leaving this space requires reorientation.

Finally, the creeks embody the site of the (mis)appropriation of every facet of the Nigerian society. For instance, some Pentecostal pastors visit the creeks regularly to pray for the insurgents and collect handsome stipends for their efforts. This practice was routine at the NDFC camp in Edo state.¹⁷ It is also common in Delta and Bayelsa states, where insurgents are keen to garner any spiritual protection they could afford. Politicians also strike deals with insurgents to win elections, particularly in Delta state, where the younger brother of a major insurgent leader has been elected chair of a local council. Everyone seems (in)directly connected to the creeks. Families of insurgents, traditional rulers, community elders, community members, the oil industry and the Nigerian state are all performatively positioned at the creeks through indirect participation, patronage, inertia or sheer complicity.

The Role of Women in the Insurgency

In this section, I analyse the role of women in the kidnapping episodes in particular and the insurgency in general. In doing this, I do not attempt to cover the breadth of the vast literature. What follows offers only a specific glimpse at the level of women’s involvement in the ongoing insurgency. The historical engagement of Nigerian women in struggles against perceived injustice is well documented (Ikelegbe 2005; Mba 1982; Van Allen 1971). For instance, women performed numerous pivotal roles when the Eastern region carried out a violent secessionist campaign. This culminated in the Nigerian Civil War (1967–70) between the federal government and the breakaway Biafra Republic. An estimated one million lives were lost. Achebe (2010) provides a compelling narrative of the role of Biafran women in support of the war efforts. Some women performed literary roles documenting the lived experience of Biafrans for posterity. Biafran women were also involved in children’s welfare and education. Other women, including the author, Achebe, participated in the political struggles and demonstrations before the war. As food supplies ran low during the war, several Biafran women were engaged in potentially lethal cross-border farming and entered into enemy territory to procure food in the market at the risk of life and limb (Achebe 2010).

The Biafran women were a major part of the Organization of Freedom Fighters (BOFF), ‘an elaborately organized and carefully structured military organ set up to operate mainly behind enemy lines and to supplement the effort of the regular Biafran army’ (Achebe 2010: 800). This was a vastly important war machine, with units such as Anti-Aircraft and Rocket, Anti-War Head and Rocket, Rocket Fuel, Hand Grenade, Telecommunication Equipment Modification, Training, Logistics, Intelligence, Agitation and Propaganda, among others (Achebe 2010: 800–1). Their subversive tendency is

¹⁶Interviewee 44. A commander from the NDFC, personal interview, Benin City, August 2010.

¹⁷Interviewee 20. This interviewee refused to disclose the sums of money involved.

accentuated by the fact that members moved around unarmed but provided training for fighters on how to use weapons and helped the Biafran army to destroy the supply lines of the enemy (Achebe 2010). Several women with high-school diplomas received training in weapon use and how to penetrate enemy camps (Achebe 2010). It is quite remarkable that women were part of the 'Ogbunigwe group' responsible for Biafra's bombing expeditions (Achebe 2010) at a historical moment when women were largely excluded from the major socio-economic institutions of the Nigerian society. Two Biafran women were also part of the team that produced the impressive 'piompion', a long-range anti-aircraft missile (Achebe 2010: 802). In more recent times, the women of the Niger Delta mobilized against transnational oil corporations by attacking oil facilities during the Ogharefe revolt in 1984 and 1986 in the Ekpan women's uprising, all in Warri, Delta state (Ukeje 2004; Turner and Oshare 1994).

However, academic narrative of the engagement of women in the current Delta struggle is overwhelmingly centred on either how women encourage their husbands and children to fight or as non-violent protesters (Ukeje 2004). This creates the false impression that women in the Delta are not involved in using violent repertoires of protest or that they have largely been the 'silent ones' who support others (George 2008a: 1195). The role of women in the movement goes beyond traditional issues like food production (see Okorie and Williams 2009; George 2008b), peaceful quest for economic empowerment (see Agboola and Amoo 2008; Okafor 2008) and domestic duties such as taking care of the children and the home when men are in the trenches.¹⁸

The areas highlighted above are some of the crucial roles of the Delta women. None the less, restricting academic analysis to these roles does no justice to the magnitude of women's involvement in the explicitly violent turn of the movement since the late 1990s. Therefore, this constitutes a reductionist portrayal of the agency of the Delta women. Besides, focusing on the role of women in the domestic domain inadvertently feeds into the patriarchal ideological underpinnings of the Nigerian society. By establishing key areas in which women participate in the Delta insurgency, I aim to demonstrate that women are an essential part of the violent forms of protest just as they have been active participants in non-violent protest.

Ammunition merchandizing and gun-running

Women play a critical role in ensuring the flow of arms and ammunition to insurgents in the creeks. Two categories of women are involved here. First, there are business women, particularly from the port City of Lagos, who specialize in buying oil from insurgents and paying in guns and/or bullets, code-named 'groundnuts'. An insurgent explains that:

... if your assignment is like go get some 'ground nuts', they call bullets groundnuts ... the easiest way to get it is through women. You know women flock around guys with cash and because we do the oil business. Some who come (to the creeks) to buy oil are from Lagos since they know we use bullets, sometimes they pay us with bullets.¹⁹

The elevation of arms and ammunitions to the status of a major currency underscores their salience in the insurgency. Second, there are sisters or girlfriends of insurgents,

¹⁸Interviewees 19 and 29.

¹⁹Interviewee 20.

who help procure arms from merchants in Lagos and other major cities.²⁰ This category of women is not directly involved in profiteering, but constitutes an important source of arms shipment from source cities to the Delta. An insurgent explains in this conversation:

Respondent: You know there are some women who see us, they know us to be . . . let me use the word militants and they even want to come close to you because of who you are, you understand. They even ask, ‘What can I do for you?’

Interviewer: Hmm.

Respondent: Some of these people know what we are fighting for, some of them are our sisters, blood sisters, you understand. Like let’s say, I want to carry a carton full of bullets from Bayelsa State to Edo State, all I need do is call one of my big sisters, ‘Sister I beg come, carry this thing, buy garri (food) put, carry am go give Solo (Solomon),’. She might not even know what is inside, you understand?

Interviewer: Yeah?

Respondent: But she would deliver it. She takes it as foodstuff going to that camp. She does that, willingly.

Interviewer: So were you in any way terrified that you might be doing something that puts her in harm’s way?

Respondent: They were willing to do it.

Interviewer: In other words, they knew the risks involved?

Respondent: Of course, they will even tell you ‘Don’t do it. I will do for you; if they (the JTF) see you your appearance is even suspicious’. They are willing to do it.

As I argue below, both groups of women benefit from the facticity of femininity and occupation of a socio-cultural space that construes (Delta) women as somehow less dangerous than men.

Mediating between insurgent groups, the Nigerian state and the oil corporations

When MEND announced the formation of the four-member ‘Aaron Team’ on 28 September 2009, it ‘nominated Ms Annkio Briggs to liaise on behalf of the group’.²¹ This is a significant achievement, as the Aaron Team was established to represent the interest of MEND in the negotiations with the federal government. Briggs’s nomination was a consequence of her active involvement at the front lines of the struggle in the Niger Delta. Prior to her nomination as liaison between the all-male Aaron Team and MEND, Briggs had become a household name and important voice in the Delta struggle in Nigeria and around the world. She had effectively become the ‘mother’ of the struggle.²² For reasons as-yet unclear, Briggs was relieved of her appointment by ‘mutual consent’ on 25 October 2009 and replaced by Amagbe Denzel Kentebe.²³ In spite of the brevity of her appointment, it was a clear demonstration of trust and

²⁰Interviewee 20.

²¹MEND’s Jomo Gbomo official e-mail statement (number 4) ‘Aaron Team’, 28 September 2009.

²²Interviewee 4.

²³MEND’s Jomo Gbomo official e-mail statement (number 8) ‘Indefinite Ceasefire’, 25 October 2009.

confidence in her prowess and level of engagement by the ultra-clandestine MEND. It also symbolizes how far women have come in the Delta struggle.

Many other women serve as peace activists in less prominent capacities. Women are actively involved in negotiations designed to secure the release of kidnapped oil workers. Many women are involved in NGOs that serve as negotiators, emissaries and go-betweens for various sides in kidnapping episodes. Some represent the oil corporations while others deliver the missive and demands of insurgents to the government and oil corporations.²⁴

Nudity as a form of protest

The idea of non-agentic and apolitical women on the African continent bears scant semblance to reality, as women often command considerable political power (Stevens 2006). One of the ways in which women exercise their political power is through their 'sexual power' (Stevens 2006: 596). The sexual power may be exercised through denial of sex to the men or the exposure of the breasts and vaginas of large numbers of post-menopausal women (Stevens 2006; Turner and Brownhill 2004; Prince 1961, cited in Stevens 2006). This public performance of nudity constitutes a 'dangerous genital power' (Stevens 2006: 593). More than any coterie of experts, anthropologists recognize the cultural significance of the genitalia and its power to symbolically pollute anyone exposed to it as a repertoire of protest by women (Stevens 2006; Prince 1961, cited in Stevens 2006). Anyone subjected to such 'genital cursing' (Bastian 2005), it is believed, may become mad or experience a lifetime of misfortune.

For instance, in November to December 1929 in colonial Eastern Nigeria, the women of Aba waged a war against several unfavourable policies: poor economic climate and impending taxation of women, which men failed to stifle (Ifeka-Moller 1975). Women sang, danced and used the sheer force of their sexual power, organizational discipline and determination for mobilization (Bastian 2005; Ifeka-Moller 1975). Symbols of colonialism like the Barclays Bank and prisons were attacked in the war (Van Allen 1971). In the end, the colonialists abandoned the plan to tax women and reduced the powers of the warrant chiefs (Mba 1982; Van Allen 1971)—two of the core demands of the women.

A similar incident occurred in Abeokuta on 29 November 1947 at the palace of the traditional ruler, the Alake (Ukeje 2004). The women camped overnight at the palace, singing songs with lyrics like:

Idowu [Alake], for a long time you have used your penis as a mark of authority that you are our husband. Today we shall reverse the order and use our vagina to play the role of husband on you . . . O you men, vagina's head will seek vengeance.²⁵

The women 'brandished their menstruation cloths' (Prince 1961, cited in Stevens 2006: 595) as the police attempted to quell the demonstration. The policemen ran away because of the belief that a lifetime of misfortune awaits anybody who gets hit by a woman's menstrual cloth (Prince 1961, cited in Stevens 2006: 595). This act of political power through sexual power is not peculiar to women in Nigeria (see Goheen 2000; Ardener 1975).

²⁴Focus Group Discussion 3; two women representing NGO groups, Yenagoa, Bayelsa state, July 2009.

²⁵See 'The Abeokuta Women's Revolt', available online at www.worldpulse.com/node/19635.

Niger Delta women also use nudity as a form of protest. This is a major contribution to the insurgency. For instance, about 600 Itsekiri women protested against Chevron/Texaco on 8 July 2002. The occupation of the oil facility lasted for 10 days (Ukeje 2004). The women ‘exposed their naked bodies, and most particularly their vaginas, to impose on oil company male dealers “social death” through ostracization, which was widely believed to lead to actual demise’ (Turner and Brownhill 2004: 67). While this public performance may seem to provide another gendered spectacle for the entertainment of men and predominantly male journalists in the Delta, it allowed the women to enter into a rigorous negotiation process with the management of the oil company. The negotiation involved at least 26 demands (Turner and Brownhill 2004). These include construction of social amenities, jobs, monthly allowance for the elderly in the community, employment and so on. This was no mean achievement considering that the local women were fighting against the might of global capital (Turner and Brownhill 2004). Also, the Delta women succeeded in furnishing other movements around the world, particularly anti-war movements, with a new tactic of protest—nudity (Turner and Brownhill 2004).

This type of protest by Delta women abound (Ukeje 2004) and enhances the urgency of the insurgency and the framing techniques of insurgents. Such protests often escalate the insurgency, as young men become enraged about the treatment of their mothers, wives, sisters, friends and community members by the security forces. In one instance, a woman died in the hands of Shell police while participating in the 2002 protest (Turner and Brownhill 2004). This encourages insurgents in no small measure. They point to police brutality on unarmed women as evidence of the need to use violent tactics against the Nigerian state and oil corporations. The death of women and children in Gbaramatu Kingdom during the incessant bombing campaigns by the JTF, for instance, is a major recruitment tool of the Camp 5 insurgent commander, Tompolo.²⁶

Women as combatants

Young women are also involved as ‘gunmen’ in the insurgency, participating in gun duels with security agencies. Interestingly, of all insurgents interviewed during the course of this study, only those from the NDPVF confirmed that women participate in active combat and also live at the creeks with male insurgents.²⁷ As other male-only creeks require, such women do not cook for insurgents and must have no sexual relationship with insurgents who are not off-duty. Anecdotal evidence suggests that such women are required to leave the camp as their menstruation approaches. As may be expected, insurgents offer very terse explanations for this and seem uncomfortable discussing it.

Women as emissaries in the insurgency

Women perform important roles as emissaries in the insurgency. Such women have varying relationships with insurgents. They may be insurgents’ wives, girlfriends, sisters and

²⁶Interviewees 34, 35 and 36. Ex-militants from Camp 5. Personal interviews, Obubra, Cross River state, August 2010.

²⁷Interviewee 15.

even mothers. Women's roles as emissaries include dispatching messages, oral and written, as well as money from the creeks to insurgents' families and loved ones at home.

Second, women serve as informants to insurgents in the creeks. Insurgent groups deploy women to strategic locations such as oil infrastructure and JTF stations as spies. In this regard, insurgents make use of women they 'play with'²⁸ for these purposes. This suggests a soft form of prostitution, albeit a constructive one for which monetary gain is tangential. Such women deliberately befriend security guards, oil workers and JTF operatives for instrumental reasons. They are able to assess the number of personnel at the oil facility and JTF stations. They ascertain other vital intelligence such as what weapons or equipment the soldiers possess, their combat-readiness, how they run shifts and so on.

Third, women occasionally provide security for insurgents by accompanying them on the waterways when they are off-duty or are on operations that do not require going in large groups or being armed. This provides easy passage on the waterways, as the JTF operatives are aware that insurgents rarely allow women in their midst. Hence, as I learnt during my fieldwork in Agge community, having a woman on board the boat was important to escape or minimize JTF scrutiny. This suggests that being in women's company makes men appear harmless and not up to no good.

Women's ability to perform these roles excellently is intensified by the security operatives' use of a gendered appeariential ordering (see Lofland 1973) or what Sacks (1972: 282–3) calls the 'incongruity procedure', concerned with determining who looks suspicious or dangerous through a subjective assessment of individuals and matching of facial characteristics with public spaces.

Spiritual fortification

Women's role as the 'powerhouse' in times of crisis is not a new phenomenon in the Delta. When King Koko led the Nembe-Brass people in the Akassa war against the Royal Niger Company and its monopolistic trade policy in 1895, for example, his 'principal wife came out and showered brown chalk on him, completing the action by throwing the remainder on the canoe as a blessing' (Alagoa 1964: 98). The women were also customarily required to sleep in the yards and not the homes until the men returned from battle (Alagoa 1964). As demonstrated above, for many insurgents at the creeks, women constitute *eewo*—abomination. Having sexual interactions with women is believed to destroy the protective cover offered by the gods. Hence, sexual acts with women at the creeks are considered *agbedo*—forbidden—as the charms insurgents adorn themselves with become impotent instantaneously. Insurgents also believe that women's menstruation has a deleterious effect on their charms.

Paradoxically, women are fundamental to the insurgency in this same area of spiritual fortification. In this regard, insurgents rely on post-menopausal or older women to perform religious rituals on them for protection against their opponents—the security agents of the Nigerian state and oil corporations. As is applicable to nude protests, genital power is invoked by the women (see Stevens 2006). In particular, women are believed to have a very efficacious 'personal power' or *ashe* 'explicitly associated with menstrual blood ... (which) intensifies as women mature, into and through childbearing—and

²⁸Interviewee 20.

beyond' (Stevens 2006: 594). Older women also help insurgents to consecrate the physical and spiritual space of the creeks.²⁹ This is intended to ward off evil and ensure that the ground—a living being in many African societies' cosmologies—on which the creeks stand accepts the purpose for which it is being used: as an insurgent base. Older women pour libation on the creek grounds to appease the earth and the ancestors on behalf of their 'sons', the insurgents. All the elements of the weather are also entreated to cooperate with the insurgents.

The post-menopausal women also bath insurgents in spiritual concoction—varieties of liquids and gels—to make insurgents' bodies impenetrable to bullets and other dangers. In this case, both the women and insurgents become one in nudity: the older women perform this sacred exercise while nude just as the insurgents appear nude for the event. Occasionally, insurgents receive lacerations on their heads, backs and below their eyes to make them spiritually agile and able to perceive and see things that are supposedly invisible to mere mortals.

Once these rituals are concluded, women become *eewo* at the creeks and to the insurgents. No woman experiencing menstruation or within the reproductive age bracket is allowed at the creeks. Her presence or, more specifically, her menstrual blood is believed to defile the grounds at the creeks and renders the fortification exercise null and void. Insurgents are not only prohibited from having sexual liaisons with women; they are also barred from eating food cooked by women within the reproductive age.³⁰ Therefore, insurgents have designated cooks at the creeks who must be males.

One major insurgent commander, who has gone into retirement from active service, for instance, lives with an older woman who accompanies him everywhere he goes to ensure his protection. As part of her duty, she tastes the food prepared by his wife before he eats. During an interview, the insurgent leader had to request that the older woman leave the room to allow him speak with the interviewer alone. A few male insurgents, like Henry Bindodogha, come from Egbesu priestly backgrounds that guarantee that they have the requisite socialization and the spiritual fortitude to carry out these rituals.³¹ The rarity of Bindodogha's spiritual prowess manifests in his having performed this role in at least four independent insurgent camps (including Camp 5 and NDPVF) before establishing the NDF in Edo state.

Conclusion

Women constitute a fundamental part of the transformation of the creeks into insurgents' home territory. They are crucial to the operational mechanics of Nigeria's oil insurgency. Post-menopausal women help to sanctify the physical and spiritual space in the creeks. They also provide the necessary spiritual ablution believed to sanctify insurgents. They offer insurgents a mixture of concoctions and gels in a public bath in the creeks for protection against gunshots. Insurgents strongly believe that such an exercise helps their bodies to repel bullets in confrontations with state security agents. When post-menopausal women complete these exercises, the creeks become an abominable space for other women within the reproductive age. Non-menopausal

²⁹Interviewee 19.

³⁰Interviewees 24 and 26.

³¹Interviewee 19.

women are forbidden from entering the creeks, as their mere presence and, in particular, their menstrual blood are believed to defile the grounds at the creeks, thus endangering insurgents.

Male insurgents are also forbidden from engaging in sexual interactions with women while at the creeks. Insurgents believe such contacts render their spiritual powers—ironically provided by post-menopausal women—null and void. Therefore, on one hand, women provide an otherworldly source of power to insurgents, yet women are believed to have the capacity to neutralize this power.

One major advantage of forbidding male insurgents from sexual interactions with women at the creeks is that *systematic* sexual violence against women is rarely mentioned in the analysis of insurgents' activities in the Delta. While there are numerous instances of sexual violence against women in the Niger Delta communities, the state's security forces are generally held responsible by the victims, their communities, the Nigerian media, human rights organizations and scholars studying the Delta crisis (see Omotola 2009; Lenning and Brightman 2009; Ukeje 2004; Human Rights Watch 1999).

Consequently, unlike many armed conflicts around the world, where sexual violence against women is routine, this does not appear to be the case among Delta insurgents. Among NDFFF insurgents, as stated earlier, women are not allowed to perform traditional gender roles like cooking for men. There are other historical examples in which women combatants in particular were protected from sexual violence through taboos. Goldstein's (2001) account of the Amazon Corps during the slavery era in the Dahomey Kingdom in the present-day Republic of Benin demonstrates how female combatants were effectively utilized in warfare. The women were believed to be 'technically married' to the king, even though he did not have sexual contacts with members of the Amazon Corps (Goldstein 2001: 21). Sexual liaison between the combatants and men was punishable by death, although breaches were often thought to occur (Goldstein 2001). Therefore, sexual abuse of women by insurgent groups in armed conflicts is not necessarily a universal phenomenon (see Mazurana *et al.* 2002: 111). This is also true in the crisis in Sri Lanka, where women occupy a significant role in the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and help adjudicate cases of domestic violence (Rajasingham-Senanayake 2004).

Women's involvement in the Delta insurgency functions on a number of micro and macro factors. At a macro level, women benefit from the patriarchal ideational infrastructure of the wider Nigerian society about the 'place' of women. This ideology constructs women as the 'authentic inner country whose purity, sexuality, and traditional roles must be secured' (Baines 2003: 483). Therefore, their traditional roles do not extend to the trenches, as they are often construed as 'natural peacemakers' (see Alison 2009: 212) or *victims* in armed conflicts, rather than rational actors and perpetrators of violence (see Meintjes 2007; Moser and Clark 2001; Mazurana *et al.* 2002).

Consequently, women's involvement in the insurgency receives considerable boost from the transgressiveness of femininity and womanhood. The idea of appearing 'harmless' and 'innocuous' is only one obvious example with a social constructionist but realistic underpinning. Patriarchy has had an unintended consequence of helping women who transgress socially enforced gender boundaries. In the guerrilla war in El Salvador, for instance, women 'exploited the perceived weakness of their sex to fool the army' (Ibanez 2001: 121). Thus, at an interactional level, insurgent women benefit from the gender stereotypes and chivalry displayed by security operatives. Security operatives'

presupposition that somehow women are less dangerous than men helps the assignments of the women (see Alison 2009). Women can thus conceal weapons and bullets in their culturally prescribed clothing (see Alison 2004) and food items without much scrutiny from security agents, who sometimes find the mere presence of the women titillating. Women insurgents also display incredible genius in executing their assignment. The sheer ingenuity, guile and cunning of the women help to deceive security operatives or divert their attention from performing their assigned duties.

A corollary to the point above is the use of sexual power by women. There are two major ways in which women's sexual power is used in the Delta insurgency. First, there is a soft form of prostitution, which entails sending women who are not enlisted in the insurgency to befriend oil workers and security operatives in order to gather vital information. Such women are encouraged to establish significant rapport with the targets beyond the supplier–client relationship. Greater emphasis is placed on building trust with the target than collecting valuables, such as money. It is difficult for male insurgents to perform these reconnaissance roles, as heterosexual orientation is still the norm among oil workers and JTF operatives as well as the wider society. This type of sexual power is well documented in several armed conflicts in Africa (Lahai 2010), Asia (McKay and Mazurana 2004) and South America (Ibanez 2001). Mazurana *et al.* (2002: 110) quote a Refugees International report in which a 16-year-old girl who participated in the conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) stated that:

My sister and I joined the army because of parents were dead, and we had no jobs, I went to the front line many times, and my sister was sent to the enemy to be a spy. Girls were sent to be prostitutes and get information from the enemy. This is how my sister was used.

In the DRC case, there seems to be an obfuscation of roles of female insurgents: some perform combat roles, while others serve as prostitutes to aid the insurgency. It is not clear whether the roles are mutually exclusive. In the Delta insurgency, however, female insurgents do not serve as prostitutes. The services of non-insurgent women—for instance, professional prostitutes and girlfriends or sex partners of male insurgents—who are not part of the insurgency are engaged for spying, which often involves sexual services. This category of women—like all others within the reproductive age—is discouraged from visiting the creeks and has to rely on off-duty insurgents to pass on whatever information they may have.

The second type of sexual power exhibited by women in the Delta insurgency focuses on the spiritual fortification of insurgents, as stated earlier. Apart from a handful of insurgents from Egbesu priestly backgrounds, this is the exclusive preserve of post-menopausal women.

Women also benefit from what I call the *geographical excess* of Nigeria. With 910,768 sq km of land and 13,000 sq km of waterways—ranked 32nd in the world³²—policing the nooks and crannies of Nigeria is a gigantic task, even under the maximum-security state fostered during the years of military dictatorship, particularly in the 1990s. The Republic of Benin, Chad, Cameroon and Niger—all economically struggling states with tenuous

³²See the Central Intelligence Agency (updated 4 February 2011), 'The World Factbook', available online at <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ni.html>.

adherence to the rule of law—share land borders with Nigeria. Incidents of illegal arms shipments occur at alarming rates. One of such was intercepted in Lagos in 2010.³³ The propinquity of the Niger Delta to the Atlantic Ocean is a source of consternation to the JTF but logistic encouragement to the insurgents.³⁴ As a corollary to the point above, the sheer ineptitude of the Nigerian state, demonstrated in the porous borders and multifarious governmental failures, provides opportunities for insurgents. As stated, the insurgency in Nigeria's Delta has wider implications beyond sub-Saharan Africa. Insurgents generally prefer to kidnap foreign oil workers, so as to receive media coverage of their activities and force the Nigerian state to accede to their demands.³⁵ Insurgents also target the facilities of transnational oil corporations. These acts affect the price of oil in the international market.

There is a growing body of evidence suggesting that, although insurgent groups offer women greater opportunities for participation than conventional armies, the stereotypical roles often return when the conflict is over (Parasher 2009). Violent female actors challenge the patriarchal ideology of society yet the reality of such women in liberation struggles, as Rajasingham-Senanayake (2004), suggests oscillates between victimhood and agency or 'ambivalent empowerment' (Rajasingham-Senanayake 2001: 113). In the case of the Delta insurgency, female insurgents perform influential roles that the society accords them. However, the young women are perceived as wayward and unsuitable as wives and mothers. Their participation is also largely marginalized. When the federal government of Nigeria granted amnesty to all interested insurgents, for instance, women were among the last set of participants to go through the process of rehabilitation because male insurgents received priority attention. Women's participation in the insurgency and the rehabilitation exercise seems devalued and relegated to the fringes.

This paper investigates the symbolism and operational significance of the space represented by the creeks in the insurgency directed at the Nigerian state and the oil industry. The creeks constitute an essentialized space, where a regimen of social sorting based on appeariential ordering is carried out. This space is abominable to the agents of the Nigerian state, oil corporations, non-Nigerians, non-Deltans and others unconnected with the communal imaginary of the oil-rich Delta. The relationship of women to this space is analysed as dichotomous. Women perform several roles as gun-runners, emissaries and the spiritual backbone of insurgents, yet those within the reproductive age bracket are forbidden from close interactions with the young men. Finally, as I have demonstrated above, contrary to Ukeje (2004), women's involvement in the insurgency is not indicative of or contingent on the failure of men. Women's role in the Delta insurgency is not a mere supportive one. Rather, it is an essential part of the insurgency. This paper contributes to the on-going scholarly attempts to understand the oil insurgency in Nigeria. It also makes a contribution to the growing literature on women's involvement in armed conflicts (see Moser and Clark 2001) and challenges the stereotypical portrayal of women as docile victims. As demonstrated above, women continue to be an integral part of the violent tactics adopted by insurgents.

³³See 'Arms Importation: UN Takes Action', *Vanguard*, 6 December 2010, available online at <http://allafrica.com/stories/201012060657.html>.

³⁴Interviewee 10.

³⁵Interviewee 27.

Funding

Funding for this study was provided by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) through a 2010 IDRC Doctoral Research Grant. The author also wishes to acknowledge the support of Killam Trust for an Izaak Walton Killam Doctoral Scholarship at the University of Alberta.

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