

# Militia Formation in the Niger Delta: Exploring Action and Reaction to the Oil Industry

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## ABSTRACT

Exclusionary violence by multi-national oil companies against indigenous groups living in the Niger Delta has created fear in indigenous populations. This paper's central argument is that fear has caused violent reactions against these oil companies, including the formation of militia groups. Theoretically, this paper argues that fear is often overlooked as a factor in militia formation. This study focuses on the Ijaw in the Niger Delta who lost their lands to oil companies and feel uncompensated. Through a multi-source text analysis I found that the formation of militias is partly motivated by fear. This paper discusses fear as a result of exclusion.

**W**hy do certain groups of people opt to form militia groups as a means to an end, rather than take diplomatic or other approaches to resolve conflicts? More specifically, what benefits can militias offer their constituents; after all, why form a militia group if there is no benefit to the individual, or group?

In my study, I found the literature on militia formation sparse. It mostly concentrated on poverty as a driving factor. I find this literature to be insufficient. Looking at instances in Saudi Arabia and elsewhere, there are several cases of people who come from tremendously wealthy families who are forming, joining, and leading militias. Osama bin Laden, for example, comes from an exceptionally affluent family.

In my search to better understand militia formation I examined the Ijaw, an indigenous group inhabiting parts of the Niger Delta where ample militia activity occurs, mostly in opposition to the increasing numbers of multinational oil companies who have staked their claim in the Delta.

In this paper, I wish to bring a greater understanding of the role fear plays in militia formation through my analysis of the Ijaw people and their militant activity in the Niger Delta. I will briefly give some background information and then move to my analysis.

## Geography

Geographically, Nigeria is divided up into three regions: Northern, Western and Eastern. In 1960, after gaining independence from British Colonial rule, these regions mirrored the cultural and political factions within the country's three main ethnic groups—the Hausa-Fulani in the North, Yoruba in the West and Ibo in the East (EIU 2006). There are more than 250 separate ethnic groups with just as many languages. The Ijaw are one of these minority ethnic groups.

Nestled in the south of Nigeria is the Niger Delta. Over one third of the Niger Delta is wetlands. It is one of the largest wetland areas in the world, and certainly the largest in Africa. Over sixty percent of Nigeria's mangrove forest is found here, making it the third largest in the world (Ojo 2002:10). In the past, the area was well-known for its extensive freshwater swamp forests, and was rich in fish and wild life resources, biodiversity, and oil reserves.

This heterogeneous, multi-cultural, ethnically diverse region covers approximately 70,000km<sup>2</sup>. Home to about seven million people, the area houses the Ijaw and several other ethnic groups.

## Ijaw

The Ijaw dwell in scattered villages among the twisted waterways and swamps of the Niger Delta. Many of these villages have a history of isolation from the mainland. Ijaw villages tend to be small in population.

Ijaw villages can be characterized as “open” (Leis 1972:1). This implies two things: First, the houses are situated close together without any barriers between them. Second, matters of a private nature usually become public knowledge through gossip, fighting, and court cases.

Despite the openness of Ijaw society, the residents remain individualistic. A constant theme in Ijaw ideology and practice is free choice throughout economic, social, political, and religious institutions.

Part of the Ijaw world view is that the best way to avoid conflicts is by an individual approach to work. This is demonstrated in their well-defined gender roles. Generally, both men and women work for the same outcome, but this is done by dividing the chores and working on them individually.

The Ijaw culture demonstrates horizontal complexity. There are several groups within Ijaw society which organize through means other than genealogy. For example, grouping people in age-group sets is a way to position the population chronologically for inheritance and indirect-political purposes, as “relative age is a significant factor in the patterning of authority” (Leis 1972:18). These cross-cutting hierarchies help provide a balancing system among the Ijaw, keeping any one group of people from becoming exceedingly more dominant than the others.

## Impact

Oil exploration began in the 1950s and rapidly expanded throughout the 1960s and 1970s. This swift growth severely impacted the Niger Delta. Oil companies have taken large quantities of land belonging to indigenous groups on the Delta to support their oil terminals. For example, fifteen years ago, as a result of business dealings between ExxonMobil and local authorities the community of Finima was completely uprooted and relocated so that ExxonMobil could build its Liquid Natural Gas (NLNG) terminal in the heart of the city (Manby and Human Rights Watch 2002:11).

Impacts of the oil industry also include diminishing water quality due to frequently occurring oil leaks and spills. Women and children now must lather themselves in plant oils before wading into the swamps to keep their skin from becoming irritated from the water (Fentiman 1996). Additionally, water and soil contamination has spawned a decline in the health and numbers of fish. Without fish, the Ijaw are unable to provide food for their families, nor trade their fish at markets farther inland. Damage to the fishing economy has also come in the form of land filling, canalization, erosion, and dredging (Fentiman 1996).

This economic hardship has forced Ijaw to leave their villages, causing severe social disequilibrium. Parent-child relationships, once core to Ijaw culture, have deteriorated. Some parents have abandoned their children. Respect for elders from youth has been lost. Certain youth have been quoted describing the elders as “the epitome of colossal failure” with regards to economic and social success (Jike 2004:696). Spousal relationships have also suffered.

Ijaw social fabric has further been torn as a result of militia activity that has increased since the oil boom in the Niger Delta. More specifically, in the 1990s, several militant groups began waging violent struggles against state and multi-state oil companies who were working in the area. The militia groups were, and continue to be, primarily impassioned about their people’s alienation and economic exploitation. Militants act out their anger using violent means to attain, what they view as, social justice. Though goals differ between militia groups, generally Ijaw militias seek to control oil resources.

Perhaps the biggest impact of the oil industry has been the exclusion of native peoples from the natural resources of the Niger Delta and the wealth generated from the sale of oil

extracted from its land. This exclusion is allowed and, candidly, backed by the Nigerian government because of the economic ties which the government has with the multinational oil companies. General attitudes of both the former and latter entities towards the well-being of indigenous peoples cause much suffering and death among Ijaw Delta groups. This is because the oil companies are directly and indirectly cutting off the Ijaw's access to clean, quality, contaminant-free food and water resources. With this brief background I will move on to my analysis.

## Analysis

From the literature, I suggest two main ideas on why the Ijaw are rebelling against their oppressors: out of fear for survival, and out of anger and revenge.

Fear is a powerful emotion that drives humanity to act in severe, and yet somewhat predictable patterns. Enya Flores-Meiser, in her study of fear in Tagalog societies, suggests that fear has functional relevance; it shapes the way people socialize from an early age. Fear is linked to shame, authority, anger, and respect (Flores-Meiser 1986).

Expanding this theory, I argue that fear does not solely function to reinforce culture norms of behavior within one's social group, but that it also serves as a defense mechanism against intruders from outside the group intended for the preservation of the group. In the Ijaw's position, they are not only facing loss of tradition, but obliteration of their entire ethnic and cultural group because of the destruction caused by oil companies and the Nigerian government. Faced with such severity, many Ijaw are hopeless. In this case, fear functions as a stimulator for the Ijaw to defend themselves against oppression. My review of the literature indicates that the fear of being completely eradicated as an ethnic group is very likely now, or at least could have been at one point, a root cause of Ijaw retaliation against those who are responsible for the eradication.

Defense comes in many forms that can generally be grouped into two categories: fight or flight. Christopher Boehm argues that humans are neither innately violent, nor peaceful, but ambivalent (Boehm 1999). Humans do not want to be dominated and so when people are faced with bullies, they either fight back, or run away from the situation. Often individuals go back and forth between the two sides. Ijaw militia groups also demonstrate ambivalence in their defense tactics for survival. There are times when the militias fight their oppressors with raw brutality. Yet, other times they fight back by other, nonviolent means such as through oil bunkering. I suppose both to be proactive actions driven by fear to survive economically, ecologically, and socially as ethnically Ijaw.

While there is evidence for violence due to fear of obliteration, there is also another body of evidence that suggests that violence does not always, necessarily occur out of fear of complete annihilation, but out of disappointment, anger, feelings of injustice and the need to avenge one's people.

Many of the Ijaw youth of the 1970s desired greater development in their isolated, rural communities and had high hopes for the opportunities development would bring. Today, the optimistic youth of the 1970s are now Ijaw elders who are completely miffed about development because of the economic, ecological, and social destruction that has come with it. In fact, many feel they are worse off than they were prior to development (EIU 2006). Disappointment surrounding the development of the oil industry has turned to anger, feelings of exclusion, and dehumanization. These sentiments are expressed by President Owei, head of an organization that promotes Ijaw rights and protects their communities in the delta, “The people of the Niger delta don’t need theory—they need practical things. We need to be made to feel like human beings. There is an economic blockade of the Niger delta—they don’t want money to flow here” (Junger 2007:119). The Ijaw recognize the inequalities and prejudices that both the Nigerian government and the oil industry have against them. This awareness only intensifies the Ijaw’s anger.

Anger attributable to exclusion from economic resources has turned to violence as many Ijaw seek for justice. An outraged university lecturer declared: “Violence begets Violence” (O’Neil 2007:116). This statement was made in connection with the assassination of Ken Saro-Wiwa, one of the founders as well as the leader of the group called Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People. Saro-Wiwa actively protested against the environmental neglect by oil companies in the Ogoni village and uncompensated portions of Ogoni land that had been taken to drill for oil.

When the Nigerian government hanged Saro-Wiwa, along with eight other anti-Shell Oil company activists, a surge of violence erupted in the Delta. This outbreak of violence after his assassination demonstrates the Ijaw’s desire to take action against their oppressors to see justice carried out. I draw on the theories of Stewart and Strathern to understand revenge and its place in violence (2002:4-6). They explained that, killing another person sets up an irrevocable chain of circumstances which is retributive (Stewart and Strathern 2002:4). In many places when someone is murdered, the victim’s blood must be paid for, either through a reciprocal killing of someone in the murderer’s group, or by a death payment. This is seen as a way to balance the wrong committed by the other group.

Ijaw are not only retaliating to avenge Saro-Wiwa, but to avenge all injustices inflicted on their people. They are prepared to fight whoever wherever to take control of resources they feel belong to them. For these reasons, I draw my second conclusion, that another reason the Ijaw are reacting with violence toward oil companies and the Nigerian government is out of revenge for their fellow Ijaw family members who have been murdered by these groups, as well as to gain control of resources they feel have been swindled from them.

My analysis of the Ijaw, their exclusion, and their motivations for vengeance on the multinational oil companies and the Nigerian government has helped me answer my initial question of why certain factions choose to form militia groups. Although, this is only preliminary research, it suggests some reasons I would like to explore further.

To begin, militants are trained not to fear. Colby R. Hatfield teaches that warriors are able to perform warrior-like tasks because they have been culturally taught to suppress their fears (1986). In a state of fearlessness those in militias feel control over mind, body, and lifestyle (Hatfield 1986:94). For the Ijaw, this is a way to gain control of what seemed impossible to control two decades ago. The Ijaw are taught to fear deities, rather than tangible entities. It makes sense then, that shifting fear from a physical realm of experience to a spiritual sphere would give an incredible amount of mental and emotional control over personal reactions to physical and emotional violence—hence, conditioning Ijaw militia men to fight fearlessly against oil companies and the Nigerian government. Exercising fear restraint generates feelings of power and invincibility in the Ijaw mind.

Another motivation for joining a militia group is the social status and reputation of being seen as a fighter. Hatfield further suggests that there are incentives for the metamorphosis from fear to fearlessness (1986:92-94). He teaches that in both the Maasai and the WaSukuma societies of East Africa, warriors are motivated to become fearless partly because their sacrifice to danger is compensated by the high social visibility and freedoms they are allowed (Hatfield 1986:94). The Ijaw who have joined militias experience similar collective recognition, autonomy and prestige. As many Ijaw feel alienated from all sources, it makes sense that young men would be attracted to such a group in part to gain the respect and esteem that comes with it.

Perhaps more important than individual recognition, choosing to form a militia group to combat violence heightens visibility of the faction as a whole. Militia groups in the Niger Delta reinforce the Ijaw's place in the swaps by making their grievances evident to outsiders. Stewart and Strathern explain that "Reciprocal violence, or the threat of it, is a basis for order, as well as disorder" (2002:5). The threat of organized fighting helps maintain certain adherences to pro-social behavior. Militia formation in the Niger Delta, then, could be a response to the violence used by the oil companies to make their humanity and their exclusion known to the oil companies, the national government, and the international community.

In addition, belonging to a militia increases access to social capital. The militias of the Niger Delta form multifarious group networks and individual alliances with each other. In addition to social refuge, belonging to a militia group brings financial and material security. Developing from a socially-torn, power-limited and poverty-stricken society, it makes sense that forming a militia could help give socially displaced youths a sense of belonging, power, and security.

## Conclusion

While this is only preliminary work, based on a literature review my findings thus far have led me to conclude that fear, disappointment, anger and revenge all play key roles in a society's retaliation against outside, repressive groups. Some oppressed societies, including the Ijaw, are choosing to form militias as a way to combat their oppression because of the demonstrated benefits that can come from forming and belonging to one of these groups. A militia group, in and of itself, is a means through which un-empowered, un-recognized individuals can gain access to power, prestige, and social capital, of which, in the greater scope, they have little, if any, to begin with.

Understanding the context in which individuals choose to form militias is vitally important if we seek to alleviate militia-associated conflicts around the world. Understanding the context in which they form, rather than focusing only on how militias operate, will help outsiders, such as humanitarian organizations, identify potential militia hotspots. As well, early detection of probable militia formation will give peace workers direction on how best to intervene early on to help resolve tensions between groups and/or governments—as is often the case. Additionally, with a contextual understanding of decisions to form militias, early involvement by peacebuilders can help minimize the impact of violence if and when it does break out.

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