Petitions, Counter-Petitions and Protest as Apparatuses of Contesting Exclusionary Oil Governance in Nigeria: Experience of the Oron Ethnic Minority 1970-2022.

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Abstract

Petitions and protests have historically served as powerful tools for resisting and challenging anti-public policies across the globe. This work considers a detailed historical study of how postcolonial oil governance in Nigeria deprived the resource-bearing Oron ethnic community (in the Niger Delta) of equitable redistribution of benefits emanating from oil resources, and importantly how the community built their struggle for resource justice upon a civic-attitude of protest and a movement of petitioning. Consulting primary data and secondary literature, this article argues that petitioning, counter-writing, and protest have been viable tools for expressing resistance by ethnic minority communities in favor of reform; as in a departure from the deep-seated past of resource disparity and strides towards a future of inclusive reconstruction, citizen participation, equality in distribution of benefit, and economic development.

Introduction

Theodore Parker's famous optimism that the "universe's long arc bends towards justice"[1] is a reflection that injustice is a central element of the various transnational and global processes of historical formation. Injustice as a concept is both deeply complex and enduring, with its origins traced to the very beginnings of human societies. As a human experience, it intersects intensely with collective memory, ethical responsibility, and the pressing realities of modern global inequality. The imposition of colonial rule, for example, in Africa and the subsequent loss of land

[1]A Compilation of Abolitionist Personalities. AKSU Archive, 4. (February, 2024).

and political autonomy effectively marginalized minority groups and excluded them from the wealth and resources of the continent.[2] The effects of these policies of superiority, resource exploitation and marginalization have continued to live, grow and be felt today. It is not only evident in poverty and underdevelopment but also in political configurations and socio-economic relationships between different ethnic, interest groups, and government. Indeed, many of the civil wars, ethnic and religious tensions, and political problems that have plagued countries in postcolonial Africa are the result of injustices and oppression melt upon minorities in the afterlife of colonialization.[3] This is just as true, as evidence abodes in places like Nigeria.

Nigeria, as a developing country with an extremely diverse society comprising over 370 ethnic groups, harbors at the center of her historiography the Niger Delta minority question and oil governance. The minority question and the governance of oil have been dilemmas that have bedeviled Nigeria's socio-political landscape since its materialization as a *nation-state.* Orieso and Osarumwense describe these problems as the struggle between ethnic minority groups with oil resources and the government as they try to agree on the best ways to explore and distribute the revenue from oil extraction.[4]

But at the core of the problem is the centralization of oil governance and marginalization of oil-bearing minorities in kind with structures of British colonialism.[5] Colonialism generated forces such as economic distortions, weak state system and inequities that induced changes in traditional modes of natural resource management. At independence, the colonial norms, rules, structures, and resource governance processes were transferred to the new Nigerian political order. The new order, run largely by elites from the majority ethnic groups, jettisoned the opportunity presented by the country's independence to build an

[2]M. Mamdani, "Beyond Settler and Native as Political Identities: Overcoming the Political Legacy of Colonialism," Comparative Studies in Society and History, 4, No. 43:(2001), 651-664.

[3]Gabriel Matthew, "Towards a Peaceful Future: A Non-Military Strategy to Ending Conflicts and Violence in Nigeria," Global Scientific Journal. 11: no. 5, (2023). 1937-1964.

[4]M. Orieso and C. Osarumwense, "Issues in Nigeria's Federalism Before 1967: Resources Control, Minority Question, Democratization and Elections," Port Harcourt Journal of History and Diplomatic Studies, 5, no. 4, (2018), 171-179.

[5]Asanwana Obisiong, Interview by author, 7 March, 2024, WhatsApp audio call.

inclusive oil governing system and ensure a fair and equitable economic and socio-political schema for Niger Delta minorities. This made oil governance a product of greed, ethnic bigotry, resource deprivation, and repression. This colonially implanted structure has not gone unchallenged. There has been strong resistance by impacted oil-bearing communities. Their methods, including writing petitions, staging protests, and even resorting to litigation and violence, have been employed with great intensity. Niger Delta minorities have contested postcolonial exclusionary experiences with nearly the same intensity with which they were marginalized, causing tensions that have shaken the unity of the country to its core and threatened to trigger Nigeria's disintegration.

One such ethnic minority community is Oron, a community of about 800 thousand people, situated at the estuary of the Cross-River Basin, east of the Niger Delta. Renowned for its distinctive reliance on writing and protest as *constitutional insurgencies*, the community represents a case study in Ranajit Guha's framework of subaltern resistance. As one of the major oil-producing communities in the Niger Delta, accounting for 60% of the crude extracted in Nigeria's top oil-producing state, Akwa Ibom state,[6] this research adopts an anti-essentialist perspective, treating the Oron as active agents rather than passive subjects of history of resistance in oil governance.

Historical Background of Oil Governance in Nigeria and Niger-Delta Minorities Experiences.

The Niger Delta's history of exploitation and dispossession traces back to British imperialism in the 15th century. But discovery of crude oil in Oloibiri by Shell-British Petroleum in 1956, and the complex politics of resource governance meant the region, alongside the whole Nigeria was subject to radical changes. The British colonial government seized the opportunity of the new-found wealth and implemented a centrally controlled oil governance structure that advanced its imperial interest and those of international oil companies (IOCs) at the exclusion of the people of the region. By 1959, the Nigerian oil industry has witnessed a diversification of players, as more non-British firms, such as Tenneco, Gulf Oil (later Chevron), Agip, and Elf, were granted exploration concessions. These

[6]Ministry of Petroleum, National Cruel Oil Production Data 1995-2019. Accessed December 21, 2023.

developments led to new discoveries, including the Afam and Bomu oil wells in Ogoni territory. By October 1960, when Nigeria's long-awaited independence arrived, a total of 847,000 tons of crude oil had been exported.[7]

The concessions and the exclusion of the oil communities were forced by the impending end of British colonial rule and the Crown's grand ambition to secure continuous access of its oil companies in postcolonial Nigeria formation. This postcolonial oil interest, in addition to the frustrations of the Second World War and the postwar economic reality in Europe, thus compelled Britain to approach Nigeria's independence as a tactical shift in strategy; effectively devising it as an advanced form of indirect rule to maintain the exploitation of resources of the marginalized Niger Delta minorities. The "Niger Delta lost it before independence', as argued by Gomba. 'Long-term concessions for explorations and exploitations had been granted, making the country hooked to colonial dependency, all that remained was to leave the baton to a local political order which could poised to protect, exploit and profit from the colonial legacy".[8]

Nigeria's independence process was comparatively less turbulent to settler African colonies in which decolonization movements were fierce and bloody. Most historians believe the demand for political independence, driven by Nigerian nationalists, was most effective in shaping the decolonization trajectory to transcend the mere protection of British economic interests. This argument is dismissible. Nigeria's independence was mostly hard-pressed by economic and political tribulations and interests in post second world war Britain. The British colonial empire, weakened by the world war, faced internal economic pressures to grant independence in a way that reflected the growing global consensus against imperialism. Nnamdi Azikiwe's admission that the country's decolonization was achieved "on a platter of gold",[9] explains how little the nationalist movement struggle played in Nigeria's decolonization. Nonetheless, the process of decolonization itself, including the pre-independence constitutional

[7]A. Kalu, "Political Economy in Nigeria: The Military, Ethnic Politics and Development," International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society, 10, no. 2 (1996), 239–242.
[8]Obari Gomba, "Where Postcolonial is Colonial: Oil Conflicts in the Niger Delta," Journal of Niger Delta Studies, 3, no. 1 (2013), 27-40.
[9]Nnamdi Azikiwe's Independence Speech 1960, AKSU History Archive. (May, 2024).

conferences, the formation of political parties and elections—was filled with confusion, mistrust, and misunderstanding. There were divisive and provocative currents in the public discourse, including tensions over the country's interests and the role of ethnic minorities in securing independence. After independence, these tensions created deep fissures within the country's leadership which permitted ethno-politicking and ensured that Nigeria's new government did not integrate the 133 minority ethnic groups in the Niger Delta into the postcolonial state-building and nation-building project. Instead, the emphasis was on implementing stronger policies to exert more centralized control over oil.

The government enacted the infamous Petroleum Decree of 1967, officially known as Decree No. 51, which stipulated that 'the entire ownership and control of all petroleum in, under, or upon any lands to which this section applies be vested in the state.[10] This was followed by the Petroleum Act and Petroleum (Drilling and Production) Regulations, which further centralized oil rights and ownership under the control of the government. The continued centralization to the prioritization of the interests of the state and international oil companies over the needs and rights of the Niger Delta populations and laid the foundation for oil crises. Ukiwo writes that

> *A major continuity witnessed in the post-colonial period as a result of the ascendancy of oil has been the centralization of ownership, control and appropriation of oil revenues. To be sure, while the central government representing the British Crown owned and controlled oil in the colonial period, this ownership and control was mostly titular and symbolic since it was fiscally inconsequential. This rentier orientation was inherited by the post-colonial State which, as evident, extended and deepened its control in the oil sphere without making commensurate investments for the exploration or development of oil-bearing minorities.*[11]

[10]The Petroleum Degree of 1967, AKSU History Archive. (December, 2023).

[11]U, Ukiwo, "Nigeria's Oil Governance Regime: Challenges and Policies". In *Oil Wealth and Development in Uganda and Beyond: Prospects, Opportunities, and Challenges*, ed by U. Ukiwo, Langer, & P. Mbabazi. *(*Leuven, Leuven University Press, 2020). 309–314.

This central governance of oil, along with its materialization as a cash cow of the Nigerian government and further coloniality of political powers fueled the emergence of postcolonial survival strategies by Niger Delta minorities. Beginning as local resistance by isolated and aggrieved individuals, then families, and communities-built networks, the resistance gained size and intensity and grew into known social movements and resource management activism in the region. The demands were simple; the localization of the governance of oil resources and politics. The agitations for better oil governance and efforts towards erasing colonial legacy, which the *Ijaw Peoples Movement Press Conference of 1966* at the University of Calabar archive describe as a 'call for true federalism, resource revenue sharing, and political power distribution',[12] later call into questioned the legitimacy of the postcolonial Nigerian state,[13] and ultimately set the stage for the crises that led the country into the Civil War of 1967. While there are other important factors to consider, such as the two coups d'état and the genocidal pogroms that ignited the war, even Soyinka is convinced that the 'oil in huge reserves…largely in the Niger Delta, played a role, unquestionably in the propulsion of Biafra leaders towards secession'.[14]

Following the end of the Civil War in 1970, there was a stain on social and political relationships among ethnic groups in the country; and the destruction of infrastructures demanded the need to shift the country's oil policy towards indigenization for post-war reconciliation, recovery and reconstruction. This necessitated the awarding of contracts for oil well construction and exploration franchise to locals by the federal government, as measures towards establishing a system that permits the recirculation of oil revenue in the country. Unfortunately, the federal government was pessimistic about the loyalty of the attempted secession regions of the south and southeast toward the Nigerian project. Therefore, it was members of the Fulani-Hausa and Yoruba majority groups who received these contracts as compensation for their previous support for the federal government's warring efforts against the Biafran Republic.[15] Therefore, oil revenue

[12] A Call for Restructuring" The Ijaw Peoples Movement Press Conference of 1966. (November, 2023).
[13]Eghosa Osaghae, "The Ogoni Uprising: Oil Politics, Minority Agitation and the future of the Nigerian State," *African Affairs*, 94, no. 376. (1995), 325-344.
[14]Wole Soyinka, You Must Set Forth at Dawn. (Ibadan, Bookcraft, 2008) 120.
[15]Slyvester Nwoko, Interview by author, 11 March, 2024, WhatsApp audio call.

was gradually allocated to develop other regions at the expense of the Niger Delta oil communities. Furthermore, it ensured Niger Delta minorities were disconnected from their resources and forced to rely on the majority ethnic groups for a share of opportunities of the oil wealth. Langer and Ukiwo observe that

> *not only was the successive diminution of the percentage of revenues that accrued to the oil-bearing areas linked to the minority status of the areas but also access to the oil industry in the forms of business opportunities and employment were … favouring the people from major ethnic groups in Nigeria. Thus, the marginalistaion of oil-producing minority groups became a salient manifestation of horizontal inequalities in Nigeria after the war.*[16]

This inequality went on to fuel rivalries between minority and majority ethnic groups in the country and resulted in a locally developed version of resource imperialism as the "bigger ethnic groups of the country oppressed the minorities in the Niger Delta even more than the Britons did". The "oppressors" "had collaborations and promises of more empowerments with which they enforced the government and oil multinationals' biddings on the Niger Delta people".[17] While the divide-and-rule system intensified, it increased minority agitations, and ultimately kept Nigeria's aspirations towards Petro-hegemony[18], that is, the intentional struggles of Nigerian people to leverage oil as a tool for state-building and achieving regional and global dominance; in the woods.

The Niger Delta movements to challenge postcolonial Nigeria's claim of absolute sovereignty and control over oil were impaired by many factors; chiefly, the militarization of government and politics. Military rule was a widespread political ideology in 20th century postcolonial Africa. It created many anti-development experiences; with political instabilities as topmost. But in Nigeria, military coups prevented quality application of political leadership for development by handing power to men who were trained to formulate, interpret, and implement issues

[16]Langer and Ukiwo, Horizontal Inequalities and Militancy: The Case of Nigeria's Niger Delta. (2011). 23-34

[17]Jerro Sampson Bokoyeibo, Interview by author, 7 March, 2024, WhatsApp audio call.

[18]F. Iyayi, The Niger-Delta: Issues of Justice and Development Agenda. Centre for Democracy and Development. (2007), 64-84.

through coercion. General Ibrahim Babangida, and his short-stayed predecessor General Muhammadu Buhari; and later General Sani Abacha were ambitious to build a military-style Nigerian society. They suspended the constitution and ruled by decrees, all geared towards conditioning citizens to think and act in ways that aligned with the military iron-style leadership. Most unfortunately, these dictators viewed and interpreted the oil-bearing communities' agitations for equitable oil-governing practices as confrontation. Therefore, rather than negotiate with them, they opted for force or perhaps what Bassey describes as the iron fist method[19] against the minorities. This was the beginning of military repression of oil-governance activism.

Resource wealth has witnessed national and transnational militarization and violence, and has brought enormous international and local government repression to resource-bearing communities in the Niger Delta. This experience is not new; from the violent acquisition of slaves, to the disposition of Kings and kingdoms like Jaja and Opobo, and King Ibanichuka and Orika; force has historically been deployed side by side with covert to exploit the region's resources. In 1895, the British navy attacked and burned Brass to remove local middlemen and secure a palm oil trade monopoly for the Royal Niger Company, causing around 2,000 deaths and widespread destruction.[20] Similarly, between late 1980s and the 1990s, the Nigerian military government overly bent on sovereignty over oil employed a blend of British-styled repression, deploying special military task forces throughout the Niger Delta to crush peaceful protests against the activities of international oil companies (IOCs). In Ogoni and Umuechem alone, over 3,000 people were killed, with a disturbing number of human rights violations, as evident, included flogging, rape, and other forms of abuse, all to ensure uninterrupted oil extraction by IOCs.[21] The IOCs were a great accomplice of these repressions. They made payments to influential persons in the military and security forces to suppress and control communities through force. A top executive at Shell Oil confirmed the company's endorsement of Nigeria's military

[19]N. Bassey, Oil and Gas Exploration and Exploitation in the Niger Delta: The Social and Demographic Challenges', In *Empowerment in Africa: ERA's Community Intervention: A Model for Development*, ed by G. Ojo. (Ibadan, Kraft Books, 2003). 47-64.
[20]Records of the Pepple House, AKSU History Archive. (December, 2023).
[21]Bassey Nnimmo, We Thought It Was Oil, But It Was Blood. Transnational institute, 1-2.

government brutality, "for a commercial company trying to make investments, you need a stable environment … Dictatorships give you that".[22] Shell Petroleum was an integrated ally of military regimes in Nigeria. The company even made an open commitment in sponsoring the election of General Sani Abacha to transition to a democratic president when his military-led dictatorship grew unpopular.[23] The marriage between the IOCs and military governments allowed corporations to avoid their obligations to the environment and local communities, while the military government benefited from the resulting conflict, by increasing their security budgets and consolidating political power.

The heavy-handed approach did not only fail to address the grievances of the Niger Delta communities and toughened their experiences; it also brought two additional implications on the Nigerian state. Firstly, as the military dictators were largely northern Muslims and the repressed oil-bearing communities were mostly southern Christian communities, *salt was added to injury* by widening mistrust among these two major religious groups in the country. Secondly, the repression tactics of the military governments drove the oil-bearing minorities to resort to "Petro-insurgency", that is usage of violence in the form of militancy as the most appealing resort to achieve their demands. This led to the birth of violent militant groups, who mobilized violence around ideologies of self-determination and local resource control.[24] Per the cycle of protest model, violence, though controversial, is one of the more extreme tactics available to social movements. For the Niger Delta movements, the experiences of repeated repression were key reasons for the adoption of combative strategy of violence, in order to pressure postcolonial Nigerian authorities to respond to minority demands.[25]

The rise of militant groups in the Niger Delta fueled the emergence of crisis entrepreneurs who benefitted from the destruction of oil pipelines, oil theft, and the operation of illegal local refineries known as Kpo Fire. The competition for profits among oil companies and individuals engaged in these illicit activities

[22]Kenneth Rodman, "Nonstate Actors and Human Rights Sanctions: A Challenge to the State Centric Model?" *Ethics and International Affairs*. 12, no. 19, 35.
[23]Ikpaikor Amadi, Interview by author, 17 March, 2024, WhatsApp audio call.
[24]Preye Jackson, Interview by author, 17 January, 2024, Zoom meeting.
[25]Ekwere Danielson, Interview by author, 17 December, 2023, Zoom meeting.

placed tremendous strain on the fragile ecosystems and natural resources of the region. As climate change worsened, its devastating effects intensified in oil communities, with carbon emissions and oil spills further degrading the quality of air, water, and arable land, impacting both the environment and livelihoods.[26] By the beginning of mid 1990s, the mismanagement of oil wealth and disputes over governance, coupled with environmental degradation, water pollution, loss of livelihoods, and military repressions had put minority oil-bearing groups in resource-bondage.

The last decade of the 20th century is acknowledged as the most contentious, not just in consideration of the minorities' struggle over resource governance but in comparison with the entire political history of postcolonial Nigeria. By this period, Nigeria found itself in polycrisis including political instability, mass corruption and human rights abuses. Moreso, the consequences of oil exploitation and violent repression of agitating minorities had become so severe and unbearable that Iyayi has lamented and described the methods adopted by the federal government and multinationals in oil governance in the Niger Delta communities as *internal colonialism*,[27] and Gomba as *colonialism in postcolonial extensions*.[28] But the 90s also witnessed the transformation of social movements and resource activism into pro-democratic advocacies. The unspeakable cruelty and repression made these Niger Deltans realize that pushing for fair oil-governing practices under the brutal military regimes was as daunting as pushing a cow through the eye of a needle.[29] The execution of Ken Saro-Wiwa and his eight fellow Ogoni activists, despite widespread global calls for clemency, led the people of the Niger Delta to view wholescale democracy as the key for addressing systemic inequalities and achieving justice in oil governance.

Yet, it was until 2000, one year after Nigeria's actual transition to democratic rule, that major efforts were made to address issues of exclusionary oil governance through the establishment of the Niger Delta Development Commission.

[26]50 Years of Crude and the Niger Delta: Troubled Times Ahead? An Independent Report by Citizens Nigeria. (January, 2024).
[27]F. Iyayi, The Niger-Delta: Issues of Justice and Development Agenda, 69.
[28]Obari Gomba, "Where Postcolonial is Colonial, 40.
[29]Charles Asuk Interview by author, 27 March, 2024, In-person meeting.

Unfortunately, the Niger-Delta Development Commission (NDDC) has fallen short of expectations in delivering meaningful infrastructural and environmental developments for oil-producing minority communities. Its functions have been mostly confined to the provision of basic amenities, neglecting more profound issues such as true federalism, equitable resource management, environmental degradation, the legal frameworks governing oil extraction and benefit sharing; the heavy militarization of the region, and the unbreakable cycles of conflict among local communities. Since Nigeria's democracy is built upon political ideals which encourage marginalized groups' advocacy, the Niger Delta minorities including the Oron community have continued expressing their dissatisfaction with oil governance through constituted means. Their advocacies, as noted by Falola, is "strengthening grassroots efforts in Nigeria, effecting change, and driving development from a bottom-up approach".[30]

Oron Minority and Exclusionary Oil Governance 1970-1999

The Oron people, comprised of the Idua, Okobo, Effiat-Mbo, Ebughu, Enwang, and Oron Ukpabang communities, are situated at the confluence of the estuary and the Atlantic Ocean along the eastern coast of Southern Nigeria, near the margin of the Cross River. By virtue of environmental realities, the community is a deep-sea and coastal fishing community.[31] Due to its strategic location and natural resources, the Oron environment has supported flora, fauna, and human life for thousands of years before the advent of the Europeans. Its contact with Europe itself was enabled by its geography of waterways, which runs into the Atlantic Ocean and served as a route of trade before the formalization of colonialism.

Oil, as a natural resource, is one of the most vital energy sources. It is the key to wealth and power upon which the international economic pendulum swings. Within a decade after its discovery in 1956, the *black gold* was quick to become the cornerstone of the post-colonial Nigerian economy. Intensified exploration efforts were forged across the Niger Delta, resulting in the discovery of oil in the Effiat-

[30]Falola, Toyin, Reformist Option: Grassroots and Political Activism. In *Understanding Modern Nigeria: Ethnicity, Democracy, and Development* ed by J. Noor (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2021). 511-528.
[31]Map of Akwa Ibom State, AKSU History Archive. (September, 2023)

Mbo, Ebughu, and Enwang communities of Oron in 1971.[32] Unfortunately, every early signs of inclusion of Oron people were later jettisoned when the decision of the military government to sign a two-party Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the oil companies came into fruition in 1972.[33] It is not gainsaying that British colonial imperialism had created a single-group dominance (elite group) and multi-dimensional ethnic cleavages, which supported the lamination of elite interests over nation-building. A deep-state system which concentrates political authority in the hands of a few elites while placing the different minority ethnic groups, including Oron in utter consequence. Weeks after the MOU was signed, Oron's oil became part of the Nigerian crude 'feeding the Austins, Triumphs, Fords, and Sunbeams in London and Europe",[34] which truly served the icons of the heralded plan of postcolonial British interest in Nigeria's crude.

In the face of this development, the Oron community was besieged by vacillation. The various units of community held different opinions on oil exploration and extraction but at the same time expressively wished to understand the potential benefits and losses it could bring to Oronland. The challenge mostly was caused by poor communication systems among the various structures of the Oron society. Exception of the recent advancement in technology (which has linked humans and made communication faster and easier), Oron, divided by creeks and rivers with fluctuating tides from the Niger and the Atlantic, have a long history of difficulties in maintaining communication and drawing up communal consensus.[35] However, as the ancient Roman saying goes, *Tempora mutantur nos et mutamur in illis* (Times are changing, and we change with them), the Oron people eventually recognized that since the oil companies had secured government permission to exploit oil in their community, it would be impossible to stop their operations until the oil reserves were depleted or the companies could no longer extract oil profitably, consequently, needed to design a method to deal with the new reality, and petitioning was adopted.[36] Petitioning is a form of dissensus. Theoretically, it is an essential part of the mechanism used in employing the achievements of

[32]Sylvester Ebito, Interview by author, 27 April, 2024, In-person meeting.
[33]50 Years of Crude and the Niger Delta: Troubled Times Ahead?
[34]Charles Asuk, Interview by author, 27 March, 2024, In-person meeting.
[35]Edet Etim, Interview by author, 21 February, 2024, In-person meeting
[36]Oboho Eminue, Interview by author, 10 February, 2024, WhatsApp audio call.

knowledge and resources to achieve social justice. The agreement among the Oron people on petitioning, as will be evidently witnessed, marked the birth of a long struggle against exclusion in oil governance.

The years between 1972 and 1978 saw a rigorous extraction of oil from Oron, which had a horrific impact on both the environment and the economy of the Oron people. The land in Oron is characterized by drained coastal plain sand and alluvium, intersected by numerous streams, tributaries, extensive creeks, estuaries, and mangroves. As a result of extensive oil extraction, by 1979, the environment and the once vibrant sea-based businesses, including fishing, which is the principal economic occupation of the people, had begun to weaken. Oil spillage, pollution, and habitat destruction affected the marine ecosystem, leading to a decline in fish populations and the degradation of aquatic habitats. This in turn had a direct impact on the livelihoods of the Oron people who depended on fishing for their sustenance and economic well-being. The Oron Development Union, speaking on the peoples' behalf, petitioned that oil extraction

> *without mincing words, … have nonetheless placed our ocean's abundant wealth in jeopardy causing gross impoverishment of many fisherfolk and disrupting lives of coastal habitats and fish nursery grounds. These acts have therefore become very frustrating since right from the beginning of life in this part of Nigeria depends almost wholly on the sea. We live on the sea, die on the sea and as we come to see it today the prospects are dangerously grim and our hopes and security are dimming and worsening by the day*[37].

The Union went on and submitted a strong demand for an internationally recognized environmentally friendly oil development schedule, fearing that a total loss of Oron's ecological habitats and irreversible damage to their landmark may eventually force Oron people to re-migrate to a new settlement elsewhere. This was the first of the seven separate petitions, filed by the Oron Development Union, the apex socio-cultural and political umbrella organization of the Oron people, at

[37]Oron Union Secretariat. Petition Written to Federal Government by the Oron Union Central Executive Committee on 11, November, 1976. (February 15, 2023), 7.

home and in the Diaspora to the Federal Government and Oil Companies between January, 1979 and November, 1980.[38] The Oron Union was formed in 1925, in response to the pressing need for a unifying force committed to actions of furthering indigenous sovereignty among the Oron people. As recorded, the Union is the oldest single ethnic-group sociocultural organization in southern Nigeria and has on behalf of Oron people, held sway against forms of outside aggression.[39]

These petitions were unfortunately ignored, both by the government and the oil companies. Two factors were responsible. Firstly, the Oron people are a small minority group and riverine community without an influential representative to advocate and lobby on their behalf. This place an impediment for the Oron people's concerns to be heard and addressed at the table of the military government and multinationals. Secondly, the military dictatorship had little regard for public opinion and scrutiny; while being concerned, primarily, with cashing in on the crude. The rejection of the petitions, coupled with the long experience of exploitation under European mercantilism in the Niger Delta since the 15th century, led the Oron people, like other unfortunate societies in the region, to conclude—per Anwana, an informant—that Britain have found worthy accomplices in postcolonial Nigeria, in a horde of military government driven by cruelty, greed, and naivety to drive home their continued subtle pillage, where Oron's crude was scheduled to fund and fuel industrialization and development of Europe.[40] Many prominent Nigerian thinkers and writers, including Kenneth Dike, Wole Soyinka, and Chinua Achebe, agree with Anwana that the country's governance since independence is a continuation of colonial experience.

By 1981, the federal government had capitalized on the post-Civil War autonomy and the highly contentious fiscal policy of April 1970 to further reduce the fiscal allocations returned to state governments as compensation for oil extracted from their communities. This decision, made unilaterally by the federal military government, triggered a new wave of discontent from the Oron community. The

[38]Oron Development Union, Oron Traditional Rulers Council, Oron Elders Council, and ESSU NLAP Oro Secretariats, In-Bound and Out-bound Mails Directory. (March 22, 2024).
[39]Omen Bassey, Interview by author, 12 February, 2024, WhatsApp audio call.
[40]Asuquo Anwana, Interview by author, 15 March, 2024, In-person meeting.

disapproval stemmed from the fact that, despite the original 20-30% oil revenue-sharing arrangement between the federal and state governments, the oil-rich Oron community under Cross River State had not benefited in any tangible way from its substantial oil contributions to the federal coffers. A further reduction was a sign of worst to come. In the heat of serious backlash from Oron and other minorities in the Niger Delta through writing, the federal government decided to create more political states (subnational) as means of allowing oil derivations and allocation to reach the minorities.

In reality, Per Anwana Asuquo, an informant, state-creation was a scam inspired by revenue criminality[41] which resonates with Ken Saro-Wiwa's position that it was a strategy to cement exploitative hegemony[42] by putting a knife to cut ethnic minorities into pieces. The federal government understood that fragmenting the Oron people would weaken their collective voice and diminish the impact of their agitations and writings. By 1987, with the creation of Akwa Ibom State, the Oron people were sharply divided into two distinct political states of Akwa Ibom and Cross River. Oron people became a *minority amongst minorities* and although weakened, they continued to display their disapproval towards the new state creation through petitioning, and even went far and beyond to demand a separate state for the Obolo People. The Obolo are peoples of Andoni and Oron which are ancestrally related but politically fraternized into the states of Akwa Ibom, Abia, Bayelsa, Rivers, and Cross River. As the agitation continued, the response of the federal government was downright repressive. It is historically evident that the success of petitioning often hinges on the political climate. In the postcolonial Nigeria, state institutions were managed through military-style administration, with absence of the rule of law. This created a ripple effect, where Oron's petitions were met with severe repression. Even in stable democracies, petitioning is most effective when combined with other forms of political engagement, such as grassroots mobilization, protests, and media campaigns. However, the Oron people could not afford the repercussions of mobilizing protests against a near-fascist military regimes with established records of human rights and community-wide massacres in the Niger Delta. The repressions saw Oron people receive heavy

[41]Asuquo Anwana, Interview by author.
[42]Ken Saro-Wiwa, On a Darkling Plain: An Account of the Nigerian Civil War. (Port Harcourt, Saros, 1989), 102.

punches from the military government but it steeled their experience and strengthened their resolve to confront the state continuously through writing. Ekeng Ating, and Asuquo Edet Ukoh amongst other resource activists were arrested and tried.[43] Even Wisconsin-Madison trained Nigerian youngest professor of History, Okon Edet Uya was threatened too.

Okon Uya was a force in the struggle. The experience of studying, teaching, and researching experiences of blacks in America and the Caribbean at Wisconsin-Madison, Howard and colleges and universities in the United States in the heat of the civil rights movement, had offered Uya, a strong clue on fighting injustice.[44] This fueled his conviction upon returning to Nigeria to confront the harsh reality that, despite his community being the source of the country's main revenue, it remained among the most undeveloped and marginalized groups in the nation. The military-government repression means Oron resource-governance activism was up against a crass system and further opened the community's consciousness to the dangers of continuously challenging the status quo. This shoved Oron's oil activism to flourish into organized political movements to pressure the country's transition to democracy. The election and inauguration of Olusegun Obasanjo as democratic president on May 29, 1999, ensured the democratic struggle was realized as a result of the general increase in regional and sectoral articulation for the same purpose across the Niger Delta.

The Petitions, Counter-Petitions and Protest Years; 2000-2022

The two decades leading up to 2020 are the most eventful in terms of resource activism by the Oron people. The era witnessed increased demands by the Oron community for restructuring oil governance in the country. The advocacy was necessitated by the strong motivation of the *Oron Bill of Rights* and the reality that the oil companies operating in the Oron territory had completely affected the people by this time. As one informant noted, "It was perplexing that while the United States, Scandinavian countries, and the Asian Tigers adopted measures to satisfy their local and national interests in oil governance, Nigeria chose to exploit Oronland inhumanely...without compensating the losses for years.'[45] At the peak

[43]Oboho Eminue, Interview by author.

[44]Otoabasi Akpan. Interview by author, 12 February, 2024, WhatsApp audio call.

[45]Oboho Eminue, Interview by author.

of Oron's activism, the federal government decided to recognize communities in the Niger Delta whose territories have crude as *catchment areas*. The recognition was to formalize and guide multinational companies' corporate social responsibility strategies and the government's reinvestment of oil wealth in these communities.[46]

But the catchment process was constituted without comprehensive theoretical and practical considerations, including the negligence of several stakeholders' critical inputs which could have reflected a connection between communities' development aspirations, actualization of human needs and inclusivity in resource governance. In the end, many oil-bearing communities, including Oron, were excluded from the catchment area process. Meanwhile, communities in Ibibio and Annangland were considered, including Onna, Nsit Ibom and Essien Odim, despite lacking oil deposits. Akwa Ibom state, as the highest oil-producing subnational in Nigeria, has Oron as its highest oil-bearing community. In reality, the country's highest oil-producing community was excluded from the benefits of that production due to its minority status, while the proceeds of its oil wealth were redirected to its larger ethnic neighbors.[47] This mirrors the construct of "robbing Peter to pay Paul" and sparked unmeasurable anger from the Oron people. In response, several key Oron groups, including the Oron Development Union, Oron Traditional Rulers Council, Oron Elders Council, and ESSU NLAP Oron, launched a concerted effort, through writing that urged an immediate reconsideration and the inclusion of Oron in the catchment area provision. Between 2002 and 2006, over 70 petitions were submitted to various federal government agencies, including the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC), Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC), Office of the Secretary to the Federation, Ministry of Petroleum, Ministry of Environment, and the Presidency.[48]

Up to 37 of these petitions were written individually by members of the political class and scholars such as Dr. Effiong Edunam, Nkereuwen Etifit and several Oron foremost activists, elders and politicians who severed their individual political relationships with governments without minding the economic, political and

[46]Celestine Abia, Interview by author, 17 February, 2024, Zoom meeting.
[47]Celestine Abia, Interview by author.
[48]In-Bound and Out-bound Mails Directory.

social cost of such action.[49] The writers, as noted by Evan Esifa, understood that "challenging the decision was a moral obligation."[50] Therefore, their political investments and social capital were nothing comparable to their selfless character and unapologetic patriotism of fighting for their people. Consequently, a two-party committee of international oil companies and government representatives was therefore constituted to verify the claims made in the petitions. In critical examination, the absence of an Oron representative means the committee was already posed as a fierce defender of the interests of the ruling circle (government) and the oil companies. The exclusion itself reflects the forbade policy of the British colonial era, which systematically barred educated Nigerians from participating in governance under the pretext of their "arrogance" and "excessive demands for reforms", a restriction only lifted in the final decades of colonial rule. Unsurprisingly, the exclusion paved the way for the committee to dismiss Oron's petitions, citing insufficient evidence as the basis for dismissal.

The election of Umaru Musa Yar'Adua as Nigeria's president in 2007 was met with cautious optimism. Traditionally, northern presidents have been perceived to exhibit ethnic biases towards the Niger Delta. However, Yar'Adua appeared to diverge from this pattern. This was manifested in the creation of the Ministry of Niger Delta Affairs, and the implementation of the amnesty Programme to disarm and reintegrate resource control militant groups in the Niger Delta. The new ministry and the amnesty program were anticipated to complement the efforts of the existing NDDC in solving issues and grievances rooted in oil exploitation and unfair distribution of benefits. But many spectators questioned the potential of these establishments to achieve the kind of developmental success that was genuinely desired by indigenes of the region. Critics like Dokubo vehemently berated the amnesty program as a strategy by the federal government to criminalize the whole Niger Delta people for daring to ask for a fair share of their God-given resources[51], after all the oil militants were driven by injustice into the predatory insurgency. Nyiayaana furthered Dokubo's argument that without specific attention to the grievances of the oil-bearing ethnic minorities by the Nigerian state, the Amnesty programme and Niger Delta ministry was a move

[49]In-Bound and Out-bound Mails Directory.
[50]Evans Esifa, Interview by author, 12 February, 2024, WhatsApp voice recording.
[51]Aasri Dokubo. Amnesty is a Fraud, The Daily News, (January 4, 2013), 12.

merely toward regaining sovereignty over natural resources in the region which had steadily declined since their aggressive repression forced the rise of Petro-insurgency.[52] For the Oron people, the primary concern was the achievement of the long struggle for resource justice. The agencies, therefore, were seen as tools, albeit imperfect, for advancing their struggle. Further assessment suggests that, despite the skepticism, the fact that these institutions were managed wholly by Niger Deltans informed the Oron community about a departure from the federal government's decades-long repressive approach.[53] Thus, they resume writing of petitions.

It was not until 2013, after 35 more petitions were written and submitted[54], that the Oron community's struggle makes headway. One of the petitions written which led to a breakthrough, was read on the floor of the House of Representatives, Nigeria's lower law-making chamber by Rt. Hon. Robinson Uwak, who was a member representing Oron Federal Constituency at the chamber. Uwak presented that

> *The entire Oro nation has been grappling with neglect in many areas like roads, hospitals, schools, water, and all known basic social amenities and infrastructure. The tales of marginalization as told by the old and young from my community could easily draw tears. Despite the oil-bearing and producing status of these communities, neglect and deprivation have been our story… In many of these communities, I realized that many of their inhabitants had lost their homes as a result of the ocean surge due to oil exploration activities which had washed away their homes. Those who still had make-shift roofs over their head had no access to water and toilets hence they defecate in the streams, wash their linen in the same body of water and also drank from it. Even the dead were not spared as skulls and human remains had been washed up. I held several meetings and wrote several letters to the international oil companies operating in the Oro water and environs pleading for intervention in the area of roads, portable*

[52]K. Nyiayaana, "Post-Amnesty Peace and the Challenge of National Political Reconciliation in the Niger Delta", *Journal of Niger Delta Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (2013, 121.
[53]Bassey Atang, Interview by author, 17 December, 2023, In-person meeting.
[54]Oboho Eminue, Interview by author.

> *drinking water, scholarships, trainings, employments, power generation and so on.*
>
> *All my letters and interactions came back with no help. I remember in my meeting with Mr. Mark Ward, Managing Director of ExxonMobil he clearly told me that my people where not recognized as oil producing communities by the state and federal government and that ExxonMobil deals strictly with directives from these governments. He was full of regrets but was clear about their hands being tied on the issue of accommodating my requests under their funding provisions earmarked for Corporate Social Responsibilities…Therefore, I am petitioning for a motion on this floor of the House of Representatives at the National Assembly, asking this parliament to investigate and hold a public hearing in Oro to determine whether the five local governments of Oro nation were oil-bearing and producing communities*[55].

Led by oversight responsibilities in governance, the House of Representatives saw the need to act and impetuously adopted a firmed resolution that mandated five of its standing committees to embark on a fact-finding investigation on Uwak's petition. This investigation, as acknowledged by Nigeria's foremost news outlet, the Guardian, was a litmus test of on Nigeria's democracy.[56] After a rigorous investigation that involved a comprehensive tour of Oron communities and discussions with centrifugal forces and stakeholders and international oil companies, the committees arrived at a *consensus* that the Oron community was oil-bearing. They further stressed that the Mbo community, situated in the southernmost part of Oron, held the largest gas deposit in sub-Saharan Africa—a revelation that underscored the shock of its initial exclusion as an oil-producing area.[57] The findings were unanimously adopted by the National Assembly and subsequently communicated as a policy directive to the Akwa Ibom State government by then-President Goodluck Jonathan.

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[55]Robinson Uwak, A Petition for Federal Government Urgent Intervention in Oron Oil-bearing and Producing Status, *An Unpublished Petition*, 5-7.

[56]This Day Newspaper, 2013.

[57]National Assembly Report on Oron Oil-bear and Producing Status, Federal Constituency Liaison Office, (Accessed 22, February, 2024), 20-24.

By providence, Goodluck Ebele Jonathan, a Niger Deltan minority had succeeded late Musa Yar'Adua as Nigeria's president. It was hoped among the people of Oron, that Jonathan, being a fellow minority from the region, could increase the level of support and solidarity needed to push the implementation through. However, these hopes were soon dashed. Jonathan, wary of the political risks, treaded cautiously. He was keenly aware that championing minority causes might fuel opposition and jeopardize his re-election bid in 2015, given Nigeria's deeply established ethnic and religious divides that often dictate electoral outcomes.

Nigeria's multiethnic fusion has been a fertile ground for ethnic groups to struggle aggressively for scarce resources. This very element has enabled the mismanagement and exploitation of the country's ethnic diversity in such a manner that her National Question has become one of the most complicated in the world; played out during the implementation process of the recommendation. The Ibibio and Annang majority groups presented serious opposition through writing, against the National Assembly's report on Oron's oil production and bearing status. Their agitations were inspired by fears of losing the opportunities and compensations derived from crude royalty, to the Oron community.[58] As Oron's bigger neighbours waded into the issue, it complicated an already fraught situation and created an environment of political ambiguity that the Akwa Ibom State government leveraged to delay implementing the recommendations. Governor Godswill Akpabio, an Annang by ethnicity, was faced with the dual challenge of ethnic loyalty and political pragmatism. Moreover, the Ibibio, is the state's largest and most politically influential ethnic group. Akpabio's political survival hinged on maintaining favor with the Ibibio, as their demographic and political dominance meant their support was crucial for sustaining his political career. For him, the sword of the two majority groups was closer to his neck than the sword of the Oron people.[59]

At this juncture, the Oron people saw it as a necessary strategy to bandy words with their big neighbors. By 2014, the Oron community had formally lodged counter-petitions, urging that the positions put forth by these neighboring groups

[58]Okon Ufuo. Interview by author, 11 December, 2023, In-person meeting.
[59]Kufre Akpan, Interview by author, 11 December, 2023, In-person meeting.

be rejected.[60] They argued that based on an existing history of interethnic group relations, the Ibibio and Annang people have consistently exhibited hostility toward the Oron ethnic group since their ancestral migration and settlement in their present occupation, hence, their contention against the Federal Government's recommendation was not situated on objective fact but merely a continuation of intergroup relations build on perpetual antagonism.[61] This is validated by earlier assessments made by Emmanuel Ayadele, who closely observed the persistent hostility among the Ibibio, Annang, Oron, and Efik ethnic groups in what was then Cross River State and famously summed the state as "an antagonistic society perpetually at war with itself".”[62] It is obvious, that the uncongenial attitude towards Oron by their big neighbors was part of the grand schemes that alerted Oron's earlier opposition to be part of the newly created Akwa Ibom State in 1983 when they insisted that the three mutually antagonistic communities should not be caged to exist in a political union in the face of overwhelming evidence that such union is impracticable, as it will institutionalize perpetual faction.[63] As evident, the petitions by Annang and Ibibio against the federal government recommendation were partly consequences of General Ibrahim Babangida's authoritarian approach to statecraft, whose government remained toughed and unmoved about Oron's fear; and went on with the creation of Akwa Ibom State in 1987.

Much like Pontius Pilate in biblical lore, the federal government shifted the responsibility of implementation to the state government. This left the Oron people to traverse an increasingly hostile political environment on their own. As Abang noted, the Oron people were still running the same race, but their destination had drastically changed, as they faced surging challenges without the support they had hoped for from the federal authorities.[64] The Oron agitations were split toward the Akwa Ibom state's political leadership on one hand and the international oil companies on the other. By the end of Governor Godswill Akpabio's administration in 2015, the actions of the state's political elite and the

[60]Onwi Abang, Interview by author, 13 January, 2024, WhatsApp audio call.

[61]Petition Written to Federal Government by the Oron Union Central Executive Committee on 30 March, 1997.

[62]Emmanuel Ayadele, A Society at Trial: Looking Back and Ahead. An unpublished lecture, 8.

[63]Michael Bassey, Interview by author, 13 January, 2024, WhatsApp audio call.

[64]Asuquo Anwana, Interview by author.

two big ethnic majorities validated a harsh reality of postcolonial Nigeria: that legality of actions is the construct of the powerful and not of justice. Thus, he left the State "more disunited and hostile than he met it" per Omen Bassey who furiously went further to sum his administration as 'years of reckless buccaneering that passed as a governance".[65] Oron people did not hide their disaffection for what they perceived as ethnic-government joint hegemony and ultimately viewed the refusal to implement the recommendations as a continuation of the exclusionary governance model that had been engrained by British colonial rule. As Anwana pointed out, the ruling elites in postcolonial Nigeria inherited a system designed to perpetuate the dispossession and domination of smaller, marginalized ethnic groups like the Oron, unabatedly under the federal project.[66]

This convinced the Oron people that the soul of Akwa Ibom State has little interest in their meaningful survival without a hard fight. The refusal to implement the recommendations, thus, catalyzed a critical alteration where Oron's population no longer viewed resistance as an isolated or peripheral act but as a fundamental mechanism of survival. By 2017, this alteration had solidified into a more cohesive and sophisticated movement, marked by deliberate conceptualization, strategic articulation, and institutionalization within Oronland. Just as African Americans during the heat of the Civil Rights Movement in the United States, every single Oron indigene has come to accept without any form of doubt, the act of resistance as Oron's magic of redemption and liberation. As a consequence, there was a rise in what can be termed as *new generation* activism.

As proved by social theories of Progressivism and Social Darwinism that an offspring is an improvement upon the parent stock, the new generation of Oron activists brought more strategic organization and persuasive communication to resource activism. Their petitions and counter-petitions adopted a more forceful, yet articulate tunes that rhymed with the words of Lord Salisbury,'s assertion that those who have the power to prevent harm but choose not to are morally complicit in the outcomes. In doing so, they framed the continued exclusion of Oron from oil governance not as an inevitable outcome but as a deliberate and unjust act for

[65]Omen Bassey, Interview with author.
[66]Oboho Eminue, Interview by author.

which the state and oil companies were responsible.[67] As Janet Amba observed, Oron's petitions become more emotionally and intellectually articulated. This shows that the new writers employed a mixed method to drive compelling narratives that resonated with conscience and intellect of their readers at the table of authority.[68]

By 2020, Oron's agitation was at a crossroads. The social, economic, and political barriers to oil resource benefits have almost completely hindered the community's well-being. Sustained barriers to equitable oil wealth sharing formula had put many dividends of economic prosperity outside the feasible attainment of Oron community members, while discriminatory corporate policies by oil companies against Oron indigenes including employment and contract awarding criteria have acquired improved living conditions more psychologically costly for the community. The deprivation led to heightened anxiety, depression, and lowered self-esteem among Oron people.[69] Each year, billions of naira derived from oil revenues were allocated to fund the opulent lifestyles of the political class, with large sums earmarked for the renovation of their homes, luxury vehicles, foreign trips, and exorbitant allowances. These benefits, lavished upon a small group of individuals who neither produce tangible goods nor possess exclusive abilities essential to the state's progress, exemplify the gross inequities embedded in the postcolonial Nigerian system. This parasitic culture is aptly captured by Bassey, who describes it as a 'predatory political system where politicians hover over the pot, waiting for dollars to drop in and then swoop in to grab as much as they can'[70] while Oron, *the goose that lays the golden egg*—remains woefully neglected.

This forged the new generation activists towards new methods of struggle. For them, enough was enough. Writing has proved ineffectual; there was need for a more upsetting method. Petitioning has its limitations; which have become

[67]Effiong Edunam, "State of The Union: President General's Address at the 2017 Annual Oron Nation Conference," In *Footprints of A Patriot: The Life and Selected Writings of Dr. Effiong Edunam* ed. by O. Bassey, P. Esuh and J. Ntekim, (Lagos, Longman, 2021), 17-30.
[68]Janet Amba, Interview by author, 12, April, 2024, WhatsApp audio call.
[69]Asuquo Anwana, Interview by author.
[70]Bassey, N, Oil and Gas Exploration and Exploitation in the Niger Delta: The Social and Demographic Challenges', In *Empowerment in Africa: ERA's Community Intervention: A Model for Development, edited by* G. Ojo. Ibadan, Kraft Books, (2003). 47-64.

increasingly apparent. The bureaucratic nature writing was incapable of altering the Nigerian governance structures. The Presidency, Ministry of Petroleum, and other institutions being petitioned, as gatekeepers of a grossly unequal Nigerian society, only responded to petitions with perfunctory acknowledgements, without undertaking substantial policy changes. This provoked a critical rethinking in Oron activism. Lovestic Esu accounted that the new activists,

> *envisioned protest as a more pragmatic instrument of expressing our displeasure, disapproval, and outright rejection of the anti-minority governance system that excludes Oron from dividends of the oil extracted from our yard, and to alert our oppressors that enough was enough and heavier consequences were coming, if the necessary steps are not taken immediately to address our plight.*[71]

This was the first time a community that had long placed its faith in the power of the pen, thought of protest and even threatened violence. They had exhibited conscious civility in the presence of marginalistaion and repression, even when the Ijaw, Kalabari, Andoni, Itsekiri, Ogoni, and other ethnic minorities in the region have records of doing everything possible including Petro-militancy as part of efforts towards achieving resource justice. The change of approach was symbolic. It is important to recognize that protest and violence often intersect in resistance movements. This connection arises because violence, though controversial, frequently emerges as a tactic born out of the frustrations and constraints faced by social movements when other avenues have been exhausted or proved ineffective. Even the idealistic martyr for civil rights, Martin Luther King Jr who was overly bent on non-violence, patience, and love in transforming the political, economic, and sociocultural fortunes of blacks in the United States had later questioned the efficacy of the method, at the face of determined resistance to changes by American white oppressors.[72] Peace and justice are inseparable, lessons from history have proved the former is impossible without the latter.

[71]Lovestic Esu, Interview with author, 17, April, 2024. WhatsApp messages.

[72]Wang, Lisa. Martins Luther King Jr.'s Troubled Attitude Toward Nonviolent Resistance. Expository Essay. 2011.

Community organizing is much more than the element that binds marginalized people together in their adherence to struggles for justice. It is also permissive, by allowing individuals to learn and understand their rights, and leverage them to define and establish their duties and contributions as part of the larger movement. From market traders to youth groups, every sector of Oron society recognized the environmental and economic damages inflicted by oil companies, alongside the exacerbation of these issues by the postcolonial elite. This led to a broad-based mobilization across the community. However, the oppressive tendencies of the postcolonial Nigerian state became evident once again during the lead-up to the protest. The government attempted to pacify Oron activists with hollow promises and tokenistic offers, often described as "Greek gifts," to dissuade them from their cause. When these efforts failed, the activists faced threats and accusations of inciting public disorder, sabotage, and lawlessness.[73] It can be argued that decades of suffering and deprivation amidst the community's abundant resources naturally galvanized the people, providing a shared sense of purpose that unified them and intensified the momentum for the protest.

Protest is an indispensable element of contestation and resistance. To deny this is to oversimplify the complex dynamics of social movements and disregard numerous historical and contemporary instances where protest has forged changes in governance, policy, power structures, and race relations. The Oron protest was a manifestation of this reality. The turnout by record, is one of the largest protests in the nation's history. By all accounts, it was one of the largest protests in the nation's history, halting major roadways and bringing economic activities to a standstill. Asuquo Robert, one of the participants, emphasized that the "shutting down tactics" of the protest were deliberately designed to draw immediate attention from the Federal Government, oil multinationals, and the international community.[74] Next, the protest worked indirectly, by constructing awareness, mobilizing public opinion, and putting pressure on governments and oil corporations through sustained visibility. The socio-political climate at the time indeed influenced the feasibility of the protest and created opportunities for activists and public-spirited citizens to critic and query fissures within the Akwa

[73]Sunday Odokwo, Interview with author, In-person meeting.
[74]Asuquo Robert, Interview with author, In-person meeting.

Ibom state power structures and resource governance. This introspection was reflected in moral-searching questions like, "Is oil thicker than blood"?[75] as reported in *The Guardian* newspaper. Similarly, Dan Erokidem, an Ibibio native and Pan-Ibibio journalist, poignantly asked, "How long will the injustice that Akwa Ibom as a State meted out to our Oron brothers be allowed to continue"?[76]

The aftermath triggered a radical twist of events. It forced the state government to attempt justifying their exclusionary oil governing policies and practices publicly.[77] The defensive move inadvertently exposed contradictions in the state government approach, thereby creating opportunities for alternative discourses to gain traction. Since the protest movement had strong organizational structures, that evolved in response to years of injustice, it kept refining the strategies and forms of engagement that steered the socio-political reality that followed. It employed a grassroot to grass-top processes that operated alongside other forms of contestation, such as media campaigns and sustained public pressure, to challenge and reframe the dominant discourse on resource governance.

Ultimately, it went on to force political engagements that led to the creation of new grounds for negotiation between the state government and the Oron people. The state agreed to implement Federal Government recommendations outlined in a joint white paper issued by the Presidency and Akwa Ibom officials. As a result, oil multinationals initiated comprehensive reviews of their policies and interactions with the Oron people. This included organizing stakeholder meetings with Oron elders, expanding Community Development Programmes to incorporate Oron-specific needs, and strengthening their environmental monitoring frameworks in Oron communities.[78] These developments were reinforced by the appointment of Mr. Effiong Akwa, an Oron indigene, to lead the Niger Delta Development Commission. This, along with subsequent appointments, reflected the intense impact of the protest. What followed was the Petroleum Industry Act passed by the National Assembly and assented to law by the former President Buhari. As a legal regime, the PIA aims to advance the Oron

[75]Community Threatens Closure of Oil Firms, Guardian Newspaper Report.
[76]Daniel Erokidem, Akwa Ibom and Our Oron Brothers, Facebook publication.
[77]Akwa Ibom Government press statement on Oron Protest, Ibom News Den. (May, 2024.)
[78]Janet Amba, Interview by author.

people's decades-long struggle for inclusive oil governance by standardizing systems for royalty collection and ensuring tangible benefits for oil-producing communities.[79] The collective hope is that the PIA, alongside the achievements of the protests, will constitute Rosenstein-Rodan and Murphy's 'big push' for the development of the Oron community and indeed, fulfil Theodore Parker's optimism about the "inevitable triumph of justice" over injustice.

Conclusion

This research has elucidated the rationale that although petitions and protests may not remove exclusionary and repressive governments, they form some of the key strategies and institutional means considered nonviolence in nature, which are open to disadvantaged ethnic resource-bearing minorities in Nigeria. Focusing on the Oron ethnic minority, the research has examined how their use of petitions, counter-petitions, and protests has effectively contested the exclusionary oil governance system, and sustained their struggle over the years. While their struggle resonates deeply with the several minorities' experiences, it reinforces that indeed, resource injustice against minorities is a postcolonial inheritance of colonial frameworks, and is perpetrated through domesticated fierce ethnic and ruling circle interest-oriented governments in Nigeria and Africa.

[79]Janet Amba, Interview by author.