



# Africa Spectrum

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Anugwom, Edlyne (2011),  
Something Mightier: Marginalization, Occult Imaginations and the Youth Conflict  
in the Oil-Rich Niger Delta, in: *Africa Spectrum*, 46, 3, 3-26.

ISSN: 1868-6869 (online), ISSN: 0002-0397 (print)

The online version of this and the other articles can be found at:  
<[www.africa-spectrum.org](http://www.africa-spectrum.org)>

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Published by  
GIGA German Institute of Global and Area Studies, Institute of African Affairs  
in co-operation with the Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation Uppsala and Hamburg  
University Press.

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# Something Mightier: Marginalization, Occult Imaginations and the Youth Conflict in the Oil-Rich Niger Delta

Edlyne Anugwom

**Abstract:** This contribution examines the role of occult imaginations in the struggle against perceived socio-economic marginalization by youth militias from the Ijaw ethnic group in the oil-rich Niger Delta region of Nigeria. It argues that the asymmetric power between the federal government/transnational oil corporations (TNOCs) and the militias may have privileged the invocation of the supernatural as a critical agency of strength and courage by the youth militias. The conflict in the region embodies a cultural revision which has been necessitated by both the uncertainty of the oil environment and the prevailing narratives of social injustice. Hence the Egbesu deity, seen historically as embodying justice, has been reinvented by the youth militias and imbued with the powers of invincibility and justice in the conflict with the government and oil companies. The low intensity of the conflict has limited both the extent of operations and scale of force used by the military task force in the area and thus reinforced the perception of invincibility of the militias attributed to the Egbesu.

■ Manuscript received 1 August 2011; accepted 6 February 2012

**Keywords:** Nigeria, Niger Delta, crude oil, resource exploitation, young people, paramilitary forces, natural religions, sense of tradition

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There is no doubting the fact that occult imagination and practices are experiencing a resurgence in contemporary Africa. One area where the above has manifested is in the involvement of youth in resource conflicts on the continent. In Nigeria, occult imaginations have become pronounced in the ongoing youth conflict in the oil-rich Niger Delta region.<sup>1</sup> Anyone with a cursory knowledge of contemporary socio-political events in Nigeria would recognize the development dilemma that the on-going crisis in the Niger Delta region presents for the Nigerian state. The region consists of nine states and 185 local government areas and has a population of over 30 million in an area of difficult terrain<sup>2</sup> covering over 75,000 kilometres in the south of Nigeria. The conflict in the region has been anchored by the youth, who have waged a relentless war against perceived injustice and unfair treatment by the Nigerian polity.

The region is the source of the oil wealth that is the mainstay of the Nigerian economy. In spite of what is acknowledged as the stupendous oil wealth there (UNDP 2006), it is one of the least developed regions in the country. But even beyond the glaring social, economic and infrastructural impoverishment associated with this region (Obi 2008; Okonta 2008; Anugwom 2005, 2007; Okonta and Doughlas 2001), the citizens perceive a systematic marginalization of the region by the major ethnic groups in control of state power at the centre.<sup>3</sup> Actually, a former state governor from the region has even alleged that the decline in the derivation principle of revenue allocation<sup>4</sup> was a consequence of oil from the region being the main source of

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- 1 The influence of the occult in the Niger Delta conflict is not marginal. In this case, a prominent leader of thought from the region contended years ago that oil workers commit atrocities, “like fishing in sacred lakes, killing poultry belonging to shrines, killing totemic animals like alligators, iguanas and pythons – [all activities] forbidden by the communities – during laying of their cables in the towns” (Akegware 1995: 44). To him, the above atrocities bordering on the spiritual beliefs of the region are one factor in the youth conflict in the region and this provides an insight into the spirituality of the Ijaw and other Niger Delta peoples.
  - 2 Unfriendly environment denoted by numerous creeks, rivers, marshy forests, dense vegetation and generally difficult topography that limits both mobility and access to the various communities in the region.
  - 3 The marginalization can be properly framed as perpetrated by the elites of the three major ethnic groups in Nigeria and these groups are the Hausa/Fulani, Yoruba and Igbo.
  - 4 A system where revenue is allocated between the national government and sub-national units on the principle of derivation – namely, the area from which the revenue or resource is derived gets a certain percentage of the profits. In the 1960s and early 1970s, 50 per cent went to the central government and 50 per cent to the region or sub-state unit from which the mineral or resource was derived. Incidentally,

foreign exchange earnings for Nigeria and was a conscious effort by the ethnic majority groups to undermine the development of the area (Okilo 1980).

This thesis of ethnic majority conspiracy has been endorsed by various key persons and groups in the region (Saro-Wiwa 1995, 1994; Okonta 2008 etc.). The above scenario has not been helped by the allegations of collusion between the Nigerian state and transnational oil corporations (TNOCs) to ensure that the people of the region are deprived of rights to the oil there (Omeje 2006) and further allegations that this collusion has also sustained environmentally unfriendly oil exploration that now threatens life in the region (Anugwom 2007). As a result of the above and the development disaster the area embodies, youth and other members of society in the region see their situation as basically a case of marginalization.

Without doubt, the Niger Delta problem has received a stream of scholarly attention in the last decade. However, the corpus of literature on the conflict in the region has varied. Thus, the conflict has been attributed to a myriad of causes ranging from revenue allocation or clamour for improved oil revenue (Omeje 2004; Obi 2001), to ecological/environmental devastation arising from oil extraction (Naanen 1995; Anugwom 2007), to infrastructural decay and neglect, and marginalization and frustration (UNDP 2006; Van Dessel 1995; Ifeka 2001; Ukeje 2001; Ikelegbe 2005). But not much attention has been paid to the “grey” or secret side of the *modus operandi* of the youth militia groups that have waged war in the region.

It must be pointed out here that this paper does not attempt to recount the Niger Delta issue in contemporary Nigeria – the subject of an impressive amount of work in the extant literature (Omeje 2006; Ikelegbe 2005; Okonta 2008; Obi 2008, 2001; Gore and Pratten 2003; Okonta and Douglas 2001, etc.) – but rather to examine the role of the imagination or representation of the occult in the struggle over resources and distributional politics in Nigeria. Thus the paper focuses essentially on how occult imaginations have served as the basis of mobilization and solidarity among the youth militias engaged in this struggle. While some authors have attempted to shed light on the role of occult imagination in the Niger Delta conflict (Omeje 2005; Ifeka 2006), such efforts have been influenced by a tendency to under-estimate the strength of such imaginations or perceive them simply as cultural relics with little contemporary relevance.

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during this period the resources (groundnut, palm oil, cocoa) were derived mainly from the ethnic majority enclaves, but the derivation principle has nose-dived since oil emerged as the dominant foreign exchange earner in the late 1970s. Currently, the derivation is pegged at 13 per cent for the region or area from which the resource is derived (ethnic minority enclaves in the South).

The invocation of the occult or the deployment of occult imaginations in conflict is not entirely new in sub-Saharan Africa: Previous studies of the civil wars in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DR Congo), Sierra Leone and Liberia have indicated a tendency among youth militias to invoke occult imagination as crucial tools of war (Ellis 1999; Alie 2005; Beneduce et al. 2006). However, the fact that the causes of conflict in Africa are context-specific and differ from one case to another makes a case for a delimited focus on the Niger Delta phenomenon.

While other scholars may perceive the invocation of the occult represented by the Egbesu deity of the Ijaw ethnic group in the region as representing the normative pattern and religious beliefs of the people, I see its crucial role in emboldening, empowering and engendering the struggle of the youth as being facilitated by the marginalization of the region within the Nigerian federal system.

My examination of the role of the occult in the violence in the Niger Delta is borne out of the idea that there can never be a holistic narration of the occult that transcends geographical boundaries in its uniformity. Thus, while increases in occult imagination may be universal and result from similar challenges in life, the internal logic and manifestations should be expected to differ from one cultural area to another.

In spite of the above, it is crucial to state here that I do not claim to advance radical new knowledge in the discourse of the occult in this paper. However the present attempt is not just to revalidate what is known but to examine the extent to which the Niger Delta case presents a departure from what is already known. In other words, even though the notion of “re-traditionalism” that has been favoured in previous studies of youth militia conflicts in Africa seems appealing, it would be interesting to see how far it captures the invocation of the occult in the Niger Delta case. The fact that the Niger Delta conflict is a low-intensity conflict could mean that its nuances differ from those of the high-intensity conflict or civil wars with which most past studies have been preoccupied. This study attempts to add to existing knowledge and more crucially advance new arguments in our understanding of occult imaginations in youth militia conflicts in Africa.

This paper, utilizing both documentary data and interviews with militia adherents and elders, examines the nexus between the occult manifested in the Egbesu deity<sup>5</sup> that is employed by Ijaw militia groups in the region and the oil-related conflict there. The Ijaw, with an estimated population of

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5 The Egbesu is seen by the Ijaw as the deity of war and justice and was part of the historical opposition to British colonial agenda in the pre-colonial era.

10 million people scattered over 40 clans in six states, is the largest ethnic group within the Niger Delta region.

## Historical Overview of the Niger Delta Conflict

To elucidate the nature of the conflict in the Niger Delta and the forces defining its trajectory, I start with a brief historical overview. While the contention between the Niger Delta people and precolonial and colonial powers is well documented in history, the conflict over oil started to become heated with the onset of the Isaac Adaka Boro Revolution in the mid-1960s, a few years after Nigerian independence and the discovery of oil in commercial quantities in Oloibiri in Rivers State.

It was Isaac Adaka Boro who, with a rag-tag army of fellow Ijaw youths under the umbrella of the Niger Delta Volunteer Force (NDVF), declared the Republic of the Niger Delta and raised a flag to that effect on 23 February 1966. Boro's revolution was subsequently crushed by the superior forces of the federal government after a gallant 12-day fight.

Perhaps the late Ken Saro-Wiwa more than any other individual can be rightly seen as the face of the modern Niger Delta struggle against environment degradation and socio-economic marginalization within the Federation of Nigeria. It was Saro-Wiwa who lifted the struggle beyond mere political rhetoric and the business of a disgruntled rag-tag army of youths to an articulated and popular struggle for emancipation in the late 1980s and early 1990s, giving the struggle much-needed articulation and focus. In fact, Saro-Wiwa's influences were well captured by his role in the formation of the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP) and the popular Ogoni Bill of Rights, the latter having been presented to the government of Nigeria in 1990. While largely an advocate of peaceful struggles, Saro-Wiwa was well aware of the risks of the struggle; his death at the hands of the military junta in 1995 turned the conflict into a full-blown violent struggle between the youth militias and the government forces.

Apart from the above, the Niger Delta conflict has also gained prominence through memorable events throughout history which have defined and affected the trajectory of the struggle. These epoch events in the history of the struggle include the aforementioned Ogoni Bill of Rights; the Kaiama Declaration of Ijaw Youths in December, 1998; the Odi massacre; and the rise of the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) as a broad-based coalition of youth militia groups. While the Ogoni Bill of Rights and the Kaiama Declaration state clearly that oil production in states populated by minorities should be controlled by those minorities, the Odi massacre was an eye-opener for the people of the region, as it showed how

far the government could and would go in the bid to retain control over the enormous oil resources in the region.

The Odi massacre was carried out in the Ijaw village of Odi in Bayelsa State on 20 November 1999, some months after the Olusegun Obasanjo administration took over. The massacre was a reprisal attack on the village following the killing of 12 policemen by youth militias in the area. According to Human Rights Watch (1999), the soldiers – who were sent there on an executive order – killed dozens of unarmed civilians, above all women and children.<sup>6</sup> Interestingly, many accounts of the massacre indicate large-scale killing and arson by the Nigerian military to the extent that at the end of the day, a bank, the Anglican Church, and the health centre were the only edifices left standing in the town.

These events have also played out alongside the emergence of strong and popular youth militia leaders who have provided the muscle and committed the violence to which the struggle has been anchored since the late 1990s. Prominent among these youths are people like Asari-Dokubo, Tom Polo, Ateke Tom, Boy Loaf, etc. These actors organized fellow youth soldiers under groups like the Niger Delta Defence Force (NDDF), Niger Delta Vigilante (NDV), Niger Delta Patriotic Force (NDPF), Egbesu Boys of Africa (EBA) and others. Self-styled *mujahid* Asari-Dokubo is popular for forming the very influential Niger Delta Peoples Volunteer Force (NDPVF), which held sway as the dominant militia outfit in the early 2000s, and for the launching of his widespread violent “Operation Locust Feast” in 2004 that targeted TNOCs and their workers in the Niger Delta. Following the NDPVF in prominence and still the major youth militia group in the region is the MEND.

The MEND, which came into prominence in late 2005, is seen by informed observers as an offshoot of the NDPVF of Asari-Dokubo (Ukiwo 2007). The fact that the first two demands made by the MEND were for the releases of Asari-Dokubo and the former governor of Bayelsa State, Diepreye Alamiyeseigha (the latter of whom was then on trial for corruption and money laundering), underscores the fact that these two figures were seen as champions of the agitations of the Niger Delta people for control of the resources on their lands. Given Alamiyeseigha’s elite status, the MEND’s demand for his release as a precondition for halting its spate of bombing oil

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6 The killing of women and children is actually disavowed as a cowardly act in Ijaw norms. In fact, while men were wary of movement in the heady days of the militia conflict in the late 1990s and early 2000s, women were relatively free to move about as they were considered harmless, and it was seen as a bad omen to kill or harm them intentionally (Anugwom 2011).

facilities and kidnapping oil workers established the coterminous goal of achieving resource control held by the youth militias and by other members of Niger Delta society. In the same sense, the invocation of Egbesu in this context should be seen as a demonstration of both the socio-cultural embeddedness and legitimacy of the youth militias in the popular imagination in the region.

The government responded to these developments and to the strident calls to improve the conditions of the Niger Delta with institutional and policy strategies, including the highly politicized derivation principle of revenue allocation; the ecology fund;<sup>7</sup> and the establishment of special development agencies or commissions for the region, such as the now-defunct Oil Minerals Producing Areas Development Commission (OMPADEC) and the current Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) established in 2000, all of which were seen by the youth militias and even international observers as insufficient to address the complex and myriad social and environmental problems caused by oil exploitation. However, while the government was toying with the above strategies, the use of force following the escalation of youth violence after the extra-judicial killing of Saro-Wiwa in November 1995 became a favoured tool of the government in spite of the widespread condemnation of the killing.

This reliance on force later became systematic and gave birth to the Joint Military Task Force (JTF) (codename: Operation Restore Hope), established by the Olusegun Obasanjo government (1999–2007). The JTF became more or less an army of occupation in the region as it sought to forcefully restore peace, ensure security for oil installations and workers in the region, and confront the growing violent youth militancy in the region.

The MEND, which is closely associated with Dokubo's NDPVF, has been largely responsible – through no-holds-barred use of violence – for the government's reconsideration of the solution to the Niger Delta conflict. The MEND's overarching goal is to destroy the ability of the Nigerian government to export oil. Thus, the group announced its arrival on the scene with the killing of nine officials of the Italian oil outfit Eni S.p.A. in 2006. The subsequent series of high-level attacks and bombings by the group from

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7 One of the series of special funds allocations from the federal revenue devoted to tackling environmental degradation emanating from oil exploitation and natural disasters like erosion, flooding, desert encroachment, etc., in various parts of the country. The fund has however been riddled with political controversy and corruption, so it has remained largely ineffectual.

2006 to 2010<sup>8</sup> proved the group could reach any sensitive target within Nigeria.

The realization of the above has led to some appreciable efforts on the part of the federal government to address the problem in meaningful ways. These efforts have included the Petroleum Industry Bill, which has been in the works since 2009 and aims to achieve the following: to improve the local content of oil exploitation, the environmental sensitivity of oil exploitation, and the stake of local oil communities in the oil resources in those areas; to make oil companies responsible for environmental remediation and community development; to establish the Niger Delta Ministry (which was done in 2008) and the amnesty programme, which started in 2009 and aims to rehabilitate and re-integrate former militant youths who now renounce violence. In spite of these developments, the MEND can still hold its ground, as evidenced by the bombing in Abuja in 2010 and the bombing of an Agip Oil platform in the delta in March 2011 (among other attacks on oil installations), where it accused the government of insincerity and expressed its dissatisfaction with federal efforts.

As the above narrative indicates, the conflict has always been an unequal contest that has pitted the people of the region against the combined might of the federal government and the TNOCs. In facing this apparently insurmountable challenge, Ijaw youths and elites decided to dig deeper, utilizing all tools and resources within their socio-cultural environment to mobilize themselves. Thus, in addition to the involvement of political and intellectual elites from the region in the articulation of the grievances of the local population, other factors and forces in the environment – ranging from a difficult topography, which helps the militia remain elusive, to the myth of invincibility webbed around the Egbesu and water spirits – have also been deployed in confronting the perceived marginalization of the people by the Nigerian state and its agents in oil exploitation.

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8 Especially the attacks on the Shell Bonga offshore oil field on 20 June 2008 and the bombing of the Atlas Cove in Tarkwa Bay, Lagos, which is a major oil hub in Nigeria. Both attacks underscored the ability of the group to get to even far-flung targets and shook the government.

## Revived Anachronism? The Occult in Contemporary Perspectives

The political problem of the situation in the Niger Delta may be theoretically explained by the idea that the emergence of Nigeria as a modern-day multicultural society took place without considerable blending of the diverse ethno-regional, cultural and normative patterns of the various groups that comprise the amalgamation. This fundamental flaw has been further exacerbated by a Nigerian state whose influence severely declines as one moves away from the political centre (Abuja) to the sub-state and community levels, where social groups are more or less stagnated at the pre-amalgamation solidarities and imagination. Joseph (1987) believes that while the pursuit of material and ideal interests were carried into the wider state or federation, they were not carried into the institutions and procedures for regulating, balancing and adjudicating them at the local or traditional political level.

In a situation like this, the struggle over national resources was conceived through ethno-regional prisms with a winner-takes-all mentality. Undoubtedly, this has over the years produced enduring ethnic politics that have been a major obstacle to Nigeria's political development. The winner-takes-all attitude has created a scenario where minority groups, especially in the south of the country, have become severely marginalized and excluded from Nigeria's mainstream socio-economic and political life.

As Ashforth (2005) shows in the case of South Africa, witchcraft discourse is associated with personal and group inadequacies, and with grievances and discomfort vis-à-vis the existing status quo. In such a situation, witchcraft or occult narratives might be mobilized for social solidarity and in a collective effort against perceived enemies or sources of witchcraft. In the case of groups like the Niger Delta minorities, their perception of injustice and socio-political marginalization of themselves by the government may not only make the occult thrive but also facilitate its reinvention and the glorification of the gods and deities as the essence of justice, fair play and survival.<sup>9</sup>

Thus, it has been posited that the most spirited witch-hunting occurs where conditions are most straitened and where raw inequality or disparity also prevails (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999). This then suggests a relationship between socio-economic deprivation and the dominance of the occult.

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9 The perception of the Egbesu in the traditional Ijaw society as the god of war and justice makes its invocation in fighting injustice or socio-economic marginalization logical to the youth militias.

Perhaps the prominence of witchcraft and the occult in the youth violence in the Niger Delta may be seen as one more manifestation of the tension between democracy and witchcraft in Africa (Ashforth 2005 in the case of Soweto, South Africa), or a manifestation of some kind of modernity of witchcraft that makes distinguishing between tradition and modernity in contemporary Africa an uphill task (see for instance Geschiere 1997; Moore and Sanders 2001; Comaroff and Comaroff 1999).

The conflict or tension between the global and local or between old and new imagination of social life is often expressed in increased inter-group violence and contestations over valuable resources. This is especially the case where the stark distinction between poverty and stupendous oil wealth has bred an unending economic and political conflict. As Ifeka (2006) has aptly observed, political violence is densest at the meeting point of the global and local, where capitalist production for profit, like in the oil-producing Niger Delta, exists alongside fishing, agricultural or pastoral economies.<sup>10</sup>

In spite of the above, it is important to recognize that magic and the occult have always been seen as potent tools of war and conflict by different ethnic groups in traditional Nigeria. Oral tradition is filled with tales of fighting men fortifying themselves and sharpening their tools in readiness for war. Such occult rituals not only served as the collective conscience upon which war depends but also gave psychological impetus and confidence to the fighters.<sup>11</sup> But in the case of the Niger Delta region, the occult influence is further reinforced by the fact that animism, which logically focuses on the rivers and marine entities in the environment, is popular in the area (Nnadozie 2004).

## Re-imagining the Occult: The Egbesu as Deity and Destiny in the Niger Delta

Ifeka (2006) explains the growth of militant youth organizations by citing the strain between centrifugal and centripetal ethnic and religious identities.

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10 These have been labelled non-capitalist by Ifeka (2006).

11 Even though the National War Museum located in Umuahia in southeastern Nigeria is popular for being a repository of the weapons used in the Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970), there are also impressive displays of weapons utilized in different pre-colonial epochs in southern Nigerian societies, and the use of the occult is documented in the museum as part and parcel of warfare in traditional societies in this part of Nigeria. Thus, weapons and soldiers' uniforms were adorned with different occult materials and symbols aimed at fortifying the soldier and weakening or inflicting maximum damage on enemies.

Specifically, she sees traditional cosmologies, secret societies and modern religions as providing ideological inspiration on which people draw for resistance against forces of modernity. However, there is a need for scholars to desegregate faith/beliefs and population in the Niger Delta case. In this sense, it is likely that while the elderly, women and children may become Christians, young, active men may be more likely to seek a cosmological justification to act to change the status quo. It may be this way of thinking that has made “Egbesu cult” the rallying point of strength of the youth conflict in the Niger Delta.<sup>12</sup>

Over 90 per cent of the Ijaw profess to be Christians, though the widespread invocation and belief in the Egbesu deity among the youth militants displays an accommodation between the modern and the traditional and a tendency to compartmentalize beliefs, which is of course not a trait particular to the Ijaw.

A meaningful insight into the Egbesu deity and its significance can perhaps be provided by the understanding that in the Ijaw traditional religious beliefs, water spirits are like humans in that they are assumed to have strengths and weaknesses, and human beings usually dwell in the water spirits’ world before birth. In other words, the water spirits represent both the unborn humans and the distinguished dead. Another critical aspect of the Ijaw traditional religious belief system which may also have informed the popularity of the Egbesu among the youth fighters is the idea of ritual acculturation or the acquisition of membership of the group and all the rights and obligations therein through elaborate rituals. In this sense, one becomes Ijaw by performing such rituals of acculturation and then acquires the full rights and privileges of citizenship.

Be that as it may, the influence of the occult presented itself quite early in the engagement of the Niger Delta youth in the conflict. Actually, one of the most daring militia groups in the mid-1990s – which can be seen as the forerunner of the MEND – is the Egbesu Boys of Africa (EBA),<sup>13</sup> report-

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12 In fact, the people I interviewed tended to see the Egbesu as making a new entry into the face of the problems of the people of the region. Thus, in the views of a 69-year-old community leader in Grand Brass, Bayelsa State, “The Egbesu cult was at its peak before the successful British occupation of the Ijaw lands in the nineteenth century. After this period, most Ijaws only heard about the Egbesu deity via folklore and war songs. Not much had been heard about the Egbesu until the inception of the present democracy” (interview by the author, 10 August 2009).

13 The EBA has often been associated with the popular Ijaw Youth Council (IYC), though there is no established line of formal relationship between this shadowy group and the legally registered IYC despite the fact that the EBA was an influential Ijaw militia group.

edly invested with the power of invincibility by the Egbesu deity. The resilience of the group in skirmishes with the security agencies in the swamps and creeks of the Niger Delta soon created the myth in the popular culture of the region and beyond that the members of the group can live underwater for periods of time beyond normal human capacity without any oxygen supply. The relative failure of the security forces to destroy the group was explained by the latter's supernatural abilities.

Therefore, the Egbesu re-emerged in the Niger Delta through the EBA, whose members openly claimed to be invincible as a result of the blessing of the Egbesu.<sup>14</sup> Incidentally, the EBA was active until mid-2004 in the six states of the Niger Delta with Ijaw communities in Rivers, Bayelsa,<sup>15</sup> Akwa Ibom, Edo, Ondo and Delta. However, the Bayelsa State town of Amabolou in the Ekeremor Local Government Area is often taken as the traditional headquarters of the deity and of the EBA (CDCMS 2003; Aimaize and Oyadongha 2005; IRB 2006).

Obviously, the secrecy surrounding the Egbesu deity and the ambiguous role it plays stems from the fact that occult matters – especially initiation rites – are rarely discussed openly.<sup>16</sup> Such practices relate the esoteric to the spiritual. The more mysterious and secretive things appear the more potent they are perceived in local imagination. This fact was confirmed by the views of the former militia members I talked to in Bayelsa State. According to one of them,

When you want to be a part of the Egbesu cult, you will have to get initiated, and everything that is done there is kept secret. After you are done with the rituals, you will be declared fit by the chief priest to join in protecting the Ijaw land. There are rules we must obey after the in-

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14 The deity is in reality intertwined with the history of the Ijaw through time. In the opinion of a 72-year-old community leader in Nembe, “My son is married to a Greek woman who told me that the sun god is as old as the world itself. Egbesu deity is as old as the world too. If I tell you that Egbesu came into existence at a given date, I will be a liar. My father and his father before him came into this world seeing the deity in use. The deity is used for many purposes but it stands for the truth. That is why it is used to settle domestic matters in the Ijaw kingdom, but it is mainly used to protect the Ijaws during warfare. I go to church, but I still uphold the Ijaw traditions as a chief” (interview by the author, 15 August 2009).

15 The most dominant in this regard and with a large Ijaw population. In fact, the Ijaw make up almost the entire Bayelsa State.

16 The Egbesu, given its nature as an element of the socio-cultural heritage of the Ijaw, should not be taken as the type of socially destructive cult that attracts state legal sanctions. Therefore, the law against secret cults in Nigeria does not include local deities like the Egbesu.

itation if we want the Egbesu powers to still dwell in us. Those dos and don'ts are also kept secret, as enemies can use them against us.<sup>17</sup>

In the Niger Delta region, the youth's recourse to the Egbesu probably reflects a belief in the rarity of extreme outcomes like death while fighting for justice, as well as their frustration with changing the status quo through existing means. This is actually in tandem with Nyamnjoh's (2005) observation regarding the Nyongo among Cameroonians.

Witchcraft and occult practices are usually shrouded in secrecy, open only to the initiated. Secrecy in this case serves the purpose of mystifying the practice as well as conferring on the initiated some semblance of superior knowledge, power or wisdom. But more crucial is that secrecy serves to separate the world of the occult from the everyday, lived-in world. In spite of this distinction, Ijaw norms perceive a connection of potency between the two in which the world of secret or occult influences events in the ordinary world.

The militias in the Niger Delta often declare and demonstrate a faith in the prowess of Egbesu.<sup>18</sup> It is commonly believed that the deity has the power to confer invincibility on his warriors. But the reverence of Egbesu and the strong belief in him is not only something common to the youth militias. This deity represents a commonality of faith and fate among the Ijaw people. In fact, a 72-year-old community leader in Nembe said,

Any Ijaw community that does not have the presence of the Egbesu deity in it must be a very weak community. I know that my community, by name Nembe, is prominent [well-known] with this belief as well as Ekeremo and Odi.<sup>19</sup>

Thus, it is the god of the people and hence the subscription to it by the youth that automatically confer community support to their activities or hitherto self-acclaimed mandate. The intertwining of faith and fate that Egbesu represents to different demographic groups in the Ijaw country is perhaps best captured in the following observation:

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17 Interview by the author, 14 August 2009 (Ekeremo, Bayelsa State). Ekeremo and Odi in Bayelsa State also have large Ijaw communities.

18 This is actually somewhat of a communal article of faith. For instance, one of my research assistants, an Ijaw, Kemeaweregha Tebogren, while agreeing to assist me in the understanding of the role of Egbesu in the Niger Delta struggle, warned that there are things about the deity he would never for any price or reason disclose to me (personal communication, 28 September 2007).

19 Interview by the author, 15 August 2009.

Egbesu's warrior youth priests are initiated into secret knowledge of "medicines" conferring immunity to enemy bullets; initiates are supported by "mothers of the community", by male elders in their customary role of ancestors' representatives, as well as by priests of shrines (Ifeka 2006: 723).

Therefore the alliance of the youth<sup>20</sup> to the Egbesu deity can be explained by a curious belief in its protective powers<sup>21</sup> and the fact that such belief is seen as a route to acquiring broad-based community support for resistance or insurgency. It is only through this that they can claim or appropriate the support of the community. In other words, the supernatural endorsement of the gods or other spiritual beings generates a mandate approved by the community (Boyer 2002).

In spite of the above, it is interesting to note at this juncture that there is no distinction in outward appearance between those youths who believe in Egbesu and those who do not; there is also no strict distinction between the youths who are affronted by the perceived injustice of oil exploitation and the marginalization therein and those who readily emerge as collaborators and agents of the TNOCs and the state. In other words, while the Egbesu may perform a critical role in the resource control struggle, a good number of the youth militants have seen the conflict as an economic opportunity. Thus, the youths who are neither believers in the Egbesu nor driven by popular notions of justice collude with, work for and receive pay-off from both the state and the oil companies.

In fact, recognition of the above fact has generated the popular belief among the Ijaw that the Egbesu fights for itself, meaning those who use the deity to cheat or defraud their brothers and those who jettison the collective goal in pursuit of selfish or greedy ends will one day pay the price.

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20 The youth militias, contrary to uninformed notions, are not a band of rural-dwelling, uneducated youth. Actually, a good number of these militias, especially the key members, are quite well educated, and a few come from urban, middle-class families. The case of *mujabid* Asari-Dukobo, the leader of the NDPVF, a university drop-out and son of a judge, is instructive here.

21 In this frame of thought, one of my interviewees contended, "I am an Egbesu soldier, I don't think about dying, I think about victory. I am not afraid at all, we shall win." Interview by the author, 3 September 2007 (Nembe).

## Different Manifestations of the Occult in the Niger Delta Youth Struggle

One aspect of the occult in the Niger Delta is the often unabashed and open manifestation and declarations of such beliefs and symbols by the youths. A common sentiment in this regard is, “I am not just strong, something mightier is behind me. You will not understand, but I have a force bigger than whatever the Nigerian government can bring.”<sup>22</sup> Hence, even though the rites and rituals are secret, open declarations of allegiance are seen as giving the declarer an advantage.

In this case, the visceral and banal have become pivots of both resistance and the pursuit of political and economic justice. Thus the expansion of occult and magical practices in this respect would seem an unavoidable outcome of the tension between the allure of modernity and the limits of socio-economic space for a lot of people in Nigeria. In essence, while modernity held the promise of abundance, power, privilege and economic largesse for all, the reality has been that only a few people in postcolonial Nigeria have enjoyed these things.

But even more critical is that the desire to acquire these things and the transformation of those things into essential measures of value and social worth has invariably led to the greater urge to indulge in all forms of activities, moral/immoral and legal/illegal. This has radically mutated the occult and magical previously typified in secret and clandestine liaisons between an expert or diviner and a client. Therefore, the prominence, openness and rampant nature of the occult in the modern era may be seen as typifying modernity as the twilight between the local/traditional and the modern (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999).

However, while implicating the inherent irony of modernity and occult imagination elsewhere in Africa, the case of the Niger Delta is quite peculiar. In the views of Gore and Pratten (2003: 233):

The ideas and practices of the deity Egbesu legitimate and structure the actions its members take within the Niger Delta region [...]. However, it is its claims to a precolonial trajectory that rights of ownership over land and resources are defined in opposition to the colonial and subsequent nation-state, and these provide a key context for situating counter-narratives to economic marginalization and environmental exploitation.

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22 Interview by the author, 5 June 2009 (Buguma).

Therein lies the fundamental difference between the Egbesu phenomenon and the recourse to the occult in other conflict zones in Africa. In this sense, while such nihilistic and arcane acts of magic – like the eating of dead enemies by some units of the Kamajor militias in Sierra Leone (Alie 2005), the inversion of culture and cultural roles entailed in fighting while dressed as women in the case of the Liberian youth militias (Ellis 1999), and the bizarre rituals of youth militias in the Kivu provinces of the DR Congo (Jourdan 2004) – all point to 1) a general deployment of terror, 2) a numbing of conscience in the wake of violence, and 3) the tensions and anxieties in the context of role inversion by the youth engaged in conflict, the invocation of the Egbesu deity by youth in the Niger Delta case goes beyond the general and common manifestations of such practices since it involves the re-emergence of a commonly venerated deity associated with justice in the history of the people of the region.

Thus, the use of the deity in the Niger Delta by the militia does not just entail the deployment of an ancient reliable deity to war but also serves more crucially as both a rallying point of cultural solidarity and a representation of an ideal society and environment devoid of socio-economic marginalization, environmental degradation, and exploitation by a formal state structure. It is in this case a symbolic and spiritual embodiment of the desires and fantasies of liberation. Therefore the revival or revision of such a cultural phenomenon in the context of violence and bloodletting signals an orgiastic desire for a precolonial past where resources and their ownership and exploitation were privileged through local idioms, and social practices were reflective of a pan-Ijaw frame of social relations.

However, the whole notion of re-traditionalization should be conceived of in the case of the Niger Delta youth militants as enjoying a nuanced co-existence with Christianity. In this sense, while a good number of these militants profess to be Christians in other spheres of life, Egbesu is embraced in the conflict and struggle for resource control. In this case, the imagination of Egbesu as a deity of justice and a traditional representation of fairness, coupled with a belief in its ability to confer invincibility on the youths, make it a ready and accessible source of strength, familiar with and peculiar to the Ijaw socio-cultural environment and the experience of the people.

## Marginalization and the Reinvention of the Occult in the Niger Delta Youth Struggle

For the Niger Delta youth, the totems of Ijaw spirituality are considered a very important tool in the war against the federal government and TNOCs. Thus, “during the invasion of Ogu Base near Yenegoa, the militants who

stormed the base were said to be armed with sophisticated weapons, five speed boats, guns, dynamite, charms” (*The Week*, 3 February 2007: 23). However, even though the occult link in the Niger Delta conflict has always elicited the passing interest of observers and scholars alike, the role of a pervasive feeling of helplessness or marginalization and frustration on which it thrives has hardly been fully pursued in the extant literature. One of the few exceptions in this regard is Ghazvinian (2007), who reported:

Another soft-spoken young man named Ajemina Daniels grabbed my arm and informed me that it has been decided that this was the year they destroy the flow station if their demands were not met. I asked if they were not worried about the navy guards with their guns. Not at all, he said. “We will consult our gods.” He showed his license to be a quartermaster, which he had obtained when he was twenty-one. He was now thirty and said he had never worked (Ghazvinian 2007: 4).

This occult dimension, crucial to the youth conflict in the Niger Delta, was also captured in the report of a writer on a visit to the MEND camp. According to the writer,

We passed under a talisman strung between two trees, and minutes later we were at the camp [... ] [W]e were immediately blessed by a man who dipped a handful of leaves into what might have been palm wine and splashed us twice. No one blesses someone before killing him, I thought (Junger 2007: 6).

In spite of the above narrations, no real attempt has been made to discover either the role of the occult in the larger sociological and religious framework of the people or its equally important mediatory role in the struggle. Thus,

Those who doubt the deity take risk and I am sure they are not in the creeks. It is not about Christianity, after all I am a Christian, in fact I was baptized in the church but this is a different matter. The Egbesu is the god of war and we are his children, he is with us in this struggle.<sup>23</sup>

Be that as it may, a very alluring explanation of the recourse to the Egbesu deity is the following assertion by Omeje (2005: 81-82):

Outmatched by the military power of their adversaries, these Ijaw groups re-invent and tap into the spiritual power of the ancient Egbesu deity in their homeland, a magical device that complements their limited firepower. Most Ijaw youth fighters are generally believed to be

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23 Interview by the author, 16 June 2009.

members of the Egbesu cult, and it is widely held that the Egbesu offers magical protection against gunfire to these young militias.

However, while the above sentiments may seem quite logical, the notion of out-matching should not be over-stretched.

In spite of the superior firepower of Nigeria's military, the militias have sustained a long-term conflict in that region. In fact, this explains the recent recourse to dialogue by the government, which has produced a largely successful general amnesty programme for youth militias in the region. Thus, the demobilization of many of the militia groups has been the outcome of negotiations and trade-offs.

So the Egbesu more or less is deployed whenever and wherever the Ijaw goes to war continuously from past to present.<sup>24</sup> Perhaps the belief in the prowess of the deity among the people is best captured in the following sentiment:

The Egbesu deity has time and time again assisted the Niger Delta fighters to be more or less invincible in the eyes of the federal government. By making sure that these boys who are defending the livelihood of their fatherland do not lose their lives easily, it has aided the Niger Delta struggle. Do you know that when the Egbesu deity dwell[s] in you, that bullets cannot harm you and also machetes cannot cut through your skin? That is our strength against the heavy arms of the military.<sup>25</sup>

Therefore, while occult and fetish rituals have formed crucial components of warfare in precolonial Africa, their return in contemporary times implicates the desire of youth militias to embrace supposedly superior forces in confronting opponents. In the case of the Niger Delta, the combined might of the powerful TNOCs and the federal government that have unquestionable superiority in terms of arsenals and trained soldiers may have made the seeking of greater powers and re-traditionalism necessary. Thus, the Egbesu is imagined as a mighty force that can confront the might of the other two parties and as a deity of justice in the land that is now being desecrated and polluted through oil exploitation.

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24 For instance, the people are often wont to argue, "The deity saved our fathers from the hands of the British when they came here, it will save us from the politicians and Shell." Interview by the author, 23 June 2009 (Nembe).

25 Interview by the author, 15 August 2009 (Nembe).

## Conclusion

The dependence on and symbolic expression of faith in Egbesu by Ijaw youth militias should not be seen as representing a major anachronism in modernity; rather, it underscores the alluring enchantment and fantasy associated with modernity in various areas of the globe (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999). As I have already mentioned, one aspect of the occult in the Niger Delta situation is the often unabashed and open manifestation of such beliefs and symbols by the youth. In this case, the visceral and banal have become pivots of both resistance and the pursuit of political and economic justice.

Without doubt, the array of forces represented by the federal government and the TNOCs<sup>26</sup> might have made the youth militias dig deeper for sources of power and strength, including the supernatural. In other words, the asymmetric power between the government/TNOCs and the youth militias galvanized the deployment of all forces in the Niger Delta environment, including the Egbesu deity by the militias, who were without doubt intimidated by the might of their contenders. It actually stands to reason that the recourse to supernatural forces is heightened in situations where people face uncertainty or are confronted by seemingly insurmountable obstacles. The belief in the potency of rituals and spiritual agencies bolsters courage and reinforces the hope for a better future, especially in a case like the Niger Delta where the narratives of marginalization and social injustice hold sway as embodiments of the lot of the people from the region within the Nigerian federation.

The perceived potency of the Egbesu has also ironically been helped by the low intensity of the Niger Delta conflict. This has dictated a limited military response from the government, which has been careful not to incur the political backlash that would have been generated by an all-out, extensive military offensive in the region. As a result, the JTF is – relative to the extensive and challenging Niger Delta environment – small in both number of operatives and scale of operation. This has led to the government precluding an extensive security dragnet over the entire region, using mainly

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26 The array of forces is visibly represented by the JTF in the region. Also part of this array of forces is the enormous financial muscle available to the government and the TNOCs that has enabled them to find willing collaborators and supporters even amongst the Niger Delta region population. Finally, the coercive powers of the state embodied in the various petroleum exploration laws in Nigeria make the state both a party and a regulator of the oil exploitation process, which undoubtedly confers formidable strength to it in relation to the youth militias.

low-calibre weapons, and focusing on policing and creating a mobile military response system. The above attributes of the task force and the daunting nature of the environment make it possible for the youth militias to carry out operations and retreat quickly while the task force is focused on other areas. In most cases, therefore, the task force arrives only after the damage has been done, and the frustration this creates has invariably led to high civilian casualties like the Odi massacre (1999), the Choba rapes (1999), and the Odioma massacre (2005). The success of the militias' operations and the high probability of these youth militias escaping unscathed may have reinforced the belief in the invincibility of these militias, largely ascribed to the powers of the Egbesu deity.

Be that as it may, the expansion of the occult is not a contradiction of modernity but in fact an outcome of it. In this sense, modernity has privileged the mutation of the occult and its subsequent deployment as a generalized tool of response for marginalized groups. But the modernity explanation represents only one side of the tale. In this sense, the deployment of the occult in the Niger Delta by Ijaw youth militias also indicates a resounding case of cultural revision or re-traditionalization.

Perhaps one thing clearly borne out by my study is that in comparing the use of the Egbesu deity with similar incidences elsewhere on the continent – like the DR Congo – we need to distinguish between the notions of cultural inversion and cultural revision. Thus, while the case of places like the Congo privileged the utilization of the occult in the process of cultural inversion by young people, in the Niger Delta it was a case of revision or re-inventing and activating a deity implicated in the history of the Ijaw people as the bastion of justice. Therefore, its invocation does not just allude to the desire for a better material situation but is also representative of a symbolic and moral idea of justice in a turbulent social environment.

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### **Etwas, das mächtiger ist: Marginalisierung, okkulte Vorstellungen und der Jugendkonflikt im ölreichen Nigerdelta**

**Zusammenfassung:** In diesem Beitrag wird die Funktion okkultur Vorstellungen für den Kampf militanter Jugendlicher der Ijaw im ölreichen Nigerdelta untersucht, die sich gegen ihre sozio-ökonomische Marginalisierung wenden. Der Autor nimmt an, dass sich die jungen Kämpfer der asymmetrischen Machtverteilung zwischen der Bundesregierung und den transnationalen Ölgesellschaften und ihren eigenen Kampfgruppen bewusst sind

und sich daher an eine übernatürliche Kraft wenden, die ihnen Mut und eine entscheidende Stärke zu verleihen scheint. Die Auseinandersetzungen in der Region haben zu einer kulturellen Umorientierung geführt, bedingt durch die soziale Unsicherheit in der vom Erdöl geprägten Umwelt und die verbreiteten Erfahrungen sozialer Ungerechtigkeit. Im Konflikt mit der Bundesregierung und den Ölgesellschaften hat die militante Jugend die Gottheit Egbesu, die im traditionellen Denken der Ijaw die Gerechtigkeit verkörpert, wiederentdeckt und mit Unbesiegbarkeit und Gerechtigkeit identifiziert. Durch die niedrige Intensität des Konflikts ist der Umfang der militärischen Operationen und die Kampfkraft der dort eingesetzten Truppen bislang begrenzt geblieben; dies hat bei der kämpfenden Jugend das Bewusstsein verstärkt, durch das Wirken ihrer Gottheit Egbesu unbesiegbar zu sein.

**Schlagwörter:** Nigeria, Nigerdelta, Erdöl, Rohstoffabbau, Jugendliche/Junge Menschen, Paramilitärische Verbände, Naturreligion, Traditionsbewusstsein