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Slipping through the net: everyday agency of the young and the politics of Amnesty in Nigeria's Oil Delta

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Slipping through the net: everyday agency of the young and the politics of Amnesty in Nigeria's Oil Delta

The paper explores the manipulation of the 2009 amnesty by youth in Nigeria's oil Delta. It makes three arguments. First, that the extreme violence preceding the declaration of amnesty in 2009 was as much a youth-led insurgency to protest social and environmental justice issues as it was a crisis within Nigeria's neopatrimonial system. It draws attention to evidence that the logic of violence in this period suggests the need for greater unpacking of the motivations for violence than has been acknowledged in the literature. Second, that the amnesty programme was designed to re-constitute the collapsed neopatrimonial system linking youth to patrons both within the Delta and in the broader Nigerian society, thereby imposing what Cyril Obi described as the 'peace of oil'. To make this argument, it draws on interview data with insiders within the amnesty as well as examines the actual operation of the programme, especially in relation to how it engages with 'ex-militants'. Finally, drawing on interview data from young men currently enrolled in the amnesty, the paper shows evidence that a counter hegemonic process through which youth express their agency by manipulating the amnesty in innovative ways is going on simultaneously. These indicate a need to reconsider familiar tropes of ethnicity, culture and institutional deficits in the way we think about governance projects in post colonial Africa and the tendency to exaggerate the relevance of the 'big man'.

Keywords: Youth; amnesty; Niger Delta; clientism; patronage

Introduction

Striking at the very heart of the rentier economy in Nigeria, the insurgency in the oil rich Niger Delta was, at least before the emergence of the Boko Haram crisis, the single most potent threat to the survival of the Nigerian state since the civil war. Even though this threat tends to be discussed in the singularity, its reality is far more complex than the notion of an 'insurgency' suggests. The lines between who the key actors are, what they fight for, how they fight, what the nature of the alliances are or indeed who is/are in the ascendancy at a particular historical moment are hardly ever clear. Within this shifting social terrain, a few variables have been relatively constant.

First, the region is the key producer of value for the Nigerian government. An average 80% of annual federal revenue is derived from rents received for oil extraction activities in the Niger Delta. As a result of this centrality to the fiscal health of the state, oil activities have been tightly controlled by the state and political competition has been primarily about gaining the power to manage the massive revenues that accrue. The distribution of this revenue has oiled the Nigerian political economy in ways that have prevented the sustainable development of core institutions of governance, instead privileging the growth and expansion of informal networks of power. Second, the location of oil in the Niger Delta generates a specific type of minority politics that is acutely aware both of its marginality relative to dominant ethnic majorities as well as its centrality to the politics of accumulation and control from which their dominance derives. Obi refers to this type of minority as an 'oil minority' and defines them as an:

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3 aggregation of small ethnic groups who share a commonality underlined by their
4 physical location in the geography and political economy of oil, the lifeblood of the
5 state, the very glue keeping the disparate groups, factions and elements that constitute
6 Nigeria together.
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9 Third, the region is a very poor one in spite of the huge oil revenues that have been extracted
10 from it since the 1960s. The UNDP (2006: 35) estimates that as at 2005, the incidence of
11 poverty was around 45%. Further complicating poverty in the region is the reality that it
12 nestles within spaces of immense wealth and inequality. It is no wonder that the perception of
13 poverty is even much higher at almost 80%. The implication of this is that poverty influences
14 social behavior both as a reality and as an imagined condition. The poverty of the region is
15 often contrasted with the wealth of elite in other parts of the country and resentment
16 inevitably emerges as people infer a correlation between their relative poverty and the corrupt
17 accumulation of oil proceeds by elites all over the country. Fourth, the region is inhabited by
18 at least 30 ethnic groups, each of which claims authority over its territory or at least demands
19 higher receipts from whatever resource is extracted from it (Okwechime 2011). The dense
20 ethnic geography of the region has played well into the hands of oil multinationals, state
21 officials and unscrupulous networks, some of who benefit from fomenting communal
22 violence. The region has therefore been a hotbed of inter and intra-communal disputes often
23 relating to land and historical memory and underpinned by local struggles for access to the oil
24 revenues that the ability to claim ownership of oil wells (or the land on which they are dug)
25 can give. Finally, the region has been plagued by huge governance deficits that have
26 exacerbated the negative social impacts of the oil industry. Weak governance systems mean
27 that regulatory oversight over oil multinationals has been historically lax thereby failing to
28 curb the irresponsible extractive activities that have devastated the fragile ecology of the
29 region. This environmental devastation is further deepened by years of violence in which oil
30 infrastructure has been targeted.
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38 The contradictions arising from these key constants in the Niger Delta political economic
39 landscape has created multiple tensions that have often spilled over into violence. Young
40 people have been at the heart of these upheavals and an entire generation has been socialized
41 into an economy of violence and impunity. While there are obviously multiple drivers of
42 conflict in the region, oil extraction and its many injustices appears to be a canvas upon
43 which most of the grievances are played out. This is why oil infrastructure has been a prime
44 target in many of the violent episodes that have undermined stability in the region in the last
45 decades. The Ogoni crisis in the 1990s generated widespread international awareness of the
46 plight of Niger Delta communities in their relationship with powerful global capital and their
47 local collaborators as well as highlighted their ability to disrupt global energy markets by
48 simply mobilizing locally. This awareness became even more urgent in the period between
49 2003 and 2009 when oil production was cut by almost 40% at the height of a full blown and
50 unprecedented armed insurgency. It was in the context of this very real threat to the oil
51 industry that a Presidential Amnesty Programme was launched in 2009 by the Yar'Adua
52 government. The programme will be analysed in detail later in the article, however, it is
53 enough to mention now that, like the many state interventions before it, the Amnesty has not
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3 created a sustainable pathway towards development and peace in the region. Indeed, many
4 observers have criticized it for excluding large numbers of young people and for failing to
5 address fundamental questions about power and development in the region (Nwajiakwu 2010,
6 Obi and Rustad 2011, Ushie 2013).
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9 In many ways, the Amnesty is a space of power and it reproduces many of the competitive
10 political manipulations that have marked Nigeria's oil economy. It articulates in interesting
11 ways the shifting nature of relations between different social categories in the region and
12 highlights how social networks are often called into service to shape these relationships. This
13 paper uses the Niger Delta Presidential Amnesty Programme launched in 2009 to show the
14 ability of clients to manipulate even the most difficult context and thus to question a narrative
15 of governance in the African post-colony that exaggerates the relevance of 'big men' in ways
16 that often deny the agency of everyday youth. In order to do this, I make three interconnected
17 arguments. First, I argue that the extreme violence that preceded the declaration of amnesty in
18 2009 was as much a youth-led insurgency to protest social and environmental justice issues
19 as it was a crisis within Nigeria's neopatrimonial system. This does not suggest that there was
20 no credible grievance or even social resistance in the Delta, instead I draw attention to
21 evidence that the logic of violence in this period suggests the need for greater unpacking of
22 the motivations for violence than has been acknowledged in the literature. Second, I argue
23 that the amnesty programme was designed to re-constitute the collapsed neopatrimonial
24 system linking youth to patrons both within the Delta and in the broader Nigerian society,
25 thereby imposing what Obi (2013) described as the 'peace of oil'. To make this argument, I
26 draw on interview data with insiders within the amnesty as well as examine the actual
27 operation of the programme, especially in relation to how it engages with 'ex-militants'.
28 Finally, I draw on interview data from young men currently enrolled in the amnesty to show
29 evidence that a counter hegemonic process through which youth express their agency by
30 manipulating the amnesty in innovative ways is going on simultaneously. A caveat though is
31 necessary here. The paper has focused more on the Rivers State experience and has drawn
32 insights from what the homogenizing narrative of a broader 'Niger Delta struggle' can teach
33 us, on the one hand, about the events in the state but also on the other hand about how these
34 events have shaped that broader narrative. This focus means that the conclusions arrived here
35 should be generalized only after careful nuancing of the specific dynamics in other parts of
36 the region.
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46 What these three arguments indicate is that neopatrimonial models that focus on culture
47 (Chabal and Daloz 1999), disorder deriving from the institutionless arena of African post
48 colonial politics (Sandbrook 1972, Pratten 2013), ethnicity (Ekeh 1975) or corruption (Smith
49 2006) are inadequate frameworks for explaining the violent contexts in which social shifters
50 like youth express both agency and marginality. Because they inadequately account for
51 processes of change and the constant renegotiation of power that underpins it, these models
52 need to be rethought if we are to make sense of the bewildering register of grievance,
53 violence and crisis in the Niger Delta. The amnesty is an important window to investigate
54 both the neopatrimonial mobilization of formal institutions to serve informal power goals
55 (Erdman 2013) and the shifting nature of the negotiations that underpin these processes in
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ways that question models of neopatrimonial relations (Sandbrook 1972, Ekeh 1975, Chabal and Daloz 1999, Smith 2006) often used to investigate the African post colony. It is beyond the scope of this paper to effectively engage with the complex conceptual and methodological issues that neopatrimonial visions of politics and social relations in post-colonial states easily bring. However it is prudent, before going much further, to highlight the way the concept is operationalised here. It speaks specifically to the deliberate culturing of a social infrastructure that simultaneously challenges and strengthens formal structures of power, thereby occupying both a decidedly modern as well as traditional space of power relations (Iwilade 2014). As Erdmann & Engel (2006) brilliantly put it, ‘clientelism exists not only in the “traditional interstices” and the “traditional periphery”, but also in the “modern center” itself, which itself is not so modern, but very much tainted by, and interwoven with, “traditional” elements’. It also builds on Clapham’s (1985: 48) definition of neopatrimonialism as:

a form of organisation in which relationships of a broadly patrimonial type pervade a political and administrative system which is formally constructed on rational-legal lines. Officials hold positions in bureaucratic organisations with powers which are formally defined, but exercise those powers . . . as a form . . . of private property.

The paper takes this further by shifting the focus from those who hold the visible reins of power (the patrons) to highlighting the important and innovative ways in which clients are able to express remarkable agency by instrumentalising the very fact of their marginality as a resource with which to engage with opportunities for accumulation. In doing this, neopatrimonial relations become articulated as shifting arenas of conflict in which both patron and client are continuously engaged in seeking advantage, using resources, including but not exclusively state-based.

The Niger Delta Amnesty

In response to the devastating escalation of violence in the oil rich Delta, the Nigerian government declared its intention in June 2009 to offer a 60-day period of amnesty for combatants. The official goal was to stabilize the region through a Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) programme in furtherance of a broader agenda to ensure the medium and long-term development of the long marginalized region. In making this declaration, President Yar’Adua acknowledged two important things: First that the Nigerian State realized that its violent suppression of the various armed militias was not achieving the desired effect and could not be expected to do so in the foreseeable future. A military stalemate had thus been achieved rather than a clear victory for the Nigerian Armed Forces. Second, he acknowledged that the region had been marginalized, if not unfairly treated, by the Nigerian state thus implying that there was some sort of justification for those who had taken up arms against the state. These two factors have underlined the design of the post Amnesty agenda, particularly with regard to pay-offs and constant cuddling of ex-militants since 2009.

The 2009 DDR process was created on the back of previous attempts by the government, as far back as the Willinks Commission of 1958, to resolve the Niger Delta question. However, it was the Niger Delta Technical Committee Report of 2008 that expressly recommended the Amnesty as part of what it referred to as ‘a compact with stakeholders on the Niger Delta’. The report advised that the government should launch:

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3 Within 6 months, complete initial steps to support a disarming process for youths involved in
4 militancy. The process should begin with some confidence building measures on all
5 sides...Also credible conditions for amnesty, setting up a Decommissioning, Disarmament and
6 Reintegration (DDR) Commission and a negotiated undertaking by militant groups to stop all
7 kidnappings, hostage taking and attacks on oil installations (Niger Delta Technical Report
8 2008: 56).
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11 The Amnesty Programme was structured in three parts, addressing each segment of the DDR process
12 and designed to last about six years. The first goal, as is usual for DDR processes, was to secure a
13 cessation in violence and mop up arms from the system. This was to last between 6 August 2009 and
14 4 October 2009 when the offer to take up the Amnesty being offered was to expire. This disarmament
15 process focused specifically on the collection of arms, ammunition and explosives from the 'repentant
16 militants' and their biometric registration. It was a very public part of the Amnesty which was
17 designed to symbolize both the end of the worst years of violence but also the patrimonial
18 'forgiveness' that the state could offer for 'erring youth'. This indicates that even in the very act of
19 'reconciliation', of 'acknowledgement' or of 'admission', the intricate relations of power and
20 domination were evident. The next stage was that of Demobilisation/Rehabilitation. This was
21 designed to run for between 6 and 12 months and involved verification and documentation of
22 'repentant' militants. Enrolled persons also received training in peacebuilding and conflict resolution,
23 counseling, as well as what was called 'transformational training'. The main part of this stage of the
24 amnesty was organized in 'rehabilitation camps' scattered across the region and was handled mainly
25 by peace contractors like the Foundation for Ethnic Harmony in Nigeria (FEHN) for whom the
26 Amnesty has been an extremely lucrative venture indeed. The final stage, which is also referred to as
27 the Post Amnesty Programme is expected to last up to five years, terminating in December 2015. This
28 is the reintegration stage of the DDR and is meant to build on the 'successes' of then first two stages.
29 With an eye to more long term empowerment of former insurgents, the reintegration phase proposes
30 to create opportunities for knowledge and skills acquisition, financial empowerment, micro-credit and
31 education. It is also expected to encourage and facilitate reconciliation with the local communities,
32 and to eventually prepare youth for exit from the amnesty.
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38 By September 24, 2011 at the official conclusion of demobilization, a total of 20,192 'ex-militants'
39 had been processed and provided with non-violence training (Ushie 2013, Obi 2014, NDAP 2015) at a
40 cumulative cost of about N127 billion (\$600 million). The number of demobilized 'ex-militants' has
41 since risen to about 30,000 and the cost now around \$2 billion (NSRP 2014). The huge financial
42 investment by the Federal Government meant that whereas the region had been said to have a conflict
43 economy (Ifeka 2004, Ikelegbe 2006) where various stakeholders sought to extract value from the
44 violence that ravaged the region in the pre-amnesty years, a 'peace' industry has now emerged which
45 takes advantage of the Amnesty programme. This industry is driven both by the neoliberal logic of the
46 market and capital accumulation as well as by complex networks of clientelism which determines the
47 allocation of contracts to multiple stakeholders (Obi 2014, Iwilade 2014). The new peace industry has
48 therefore simply reproduced what Vanessa Ushie (2013: 32) aptly describes as an 'entire state
49 architecture and political system underwritten by a profitable network of distributive patronage
50 between competing ethno-regional interests, lubricated by enormous oil rents'. The new champions of
51 the clientelistic peace industry in the Niger Delta include senior ex-militants like Government
52 Ekemupolo, and Ateke Tom who 'won' pipeline protection contracts worth billions of dollars,
53 politicians, military officers as well as NGOs like FEHN that were awarded training and education
54 contracts. Many ordinary youth have also demonstrated their ability to manipulate the system by
55 'acquiring the status of militancy' and finding their way into the amnesty programme even though
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3 they had not taken up arms against the state nor were the key targets of the programme (Nwajiakwu-
4 Dahou 2012, Egb int 2013, Bonga int 2013).
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6 The huge amount of money devoted to the Amnesty project is supplemented by even greater transfers
7 to the Niger Delta states in derivation funds as well as resources provided for the NDDC and the
8 Ministry of the Niger Delta. These funds totaled about \$11.2 billion at its peak in 2012 alone (Usie
9 2013: 33) and have fuelled a number of major infrastructural projects as well as massive corruption in
10 the region. The oil industry has remained a hotbed of corruption and the political climate of the Niger
11 Delta region has remained highly dependent of corrupt networks and violent social mobilization
12 (NRGI 2015).
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15 The relative peace created by the Amnesty has facilitated a remarkable increase in the volume of oil
16 produced in the Niger Delta region from a low of about 700,000 barrels per day (bpd) to an average of
17 2.2 million bpd, and earning the country an extra \$39.3 billion in 2012 alone. Since 2009, the full
18 blown insurgency has apparently ended, leaving only sporadic and often isolated incidences of
19 violence that have not fundamentally threatened the extraction of oil from the region's thousands of
20 oil wells or the transport of crude through its thousands of kilometers of pipelines. This increase in
21 production, particularly in the years between 2010 and 2013 when oil prices were at all time highs,
22 generated progressively higher revenues which continued to fuel the complex system of patronage
23 upon which the peace apparently depended. Thousands of young people personally benefited in the
24 area of skills acquisition and education and some of them have been able to break the vicious cycle of
25 poverty, violence and disempowerment into which they had been socialized before the amnesty.
26 Indeed, many of the young men involved in the Amnesty that I spoke with expressed gratitude for the
27 opportunity and believe that they have become better prepared to face the uncertain social conditions
28 in the region as a consequence of their new training. For many ordinary people, the ability to go about
29 their daily business without molestation from the JTF or the various unruly armed militia is the
30 biggest blessing of the amnesty. While many youth remain excluded from the material benefits of the
31 amnesty which have been cornered by actors with access to networks of clientelist privilege in the
32 region, engaging in everyday social circulation, something which is taken for granted in times of
33 peace, is the biggest gift of the amnesty.
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38 The relative calm and stability however conceals the soft underbelly of what is infact a DDR project
39 designed to co-opt armed youth back into clientelistic networks that had broken down around 2003.
40 The Niger Delta remains a highly militarized region where violence and impunity are ever present
41 social realities. Within the oil complex itself, illegal bunkering and kidnappings remain significantly
42 high. The country loses an estimated \$7billion per annum to oil thieves and artisanal refiners who
43 constantly vandalize pipelines in order to procure crude for their nefarious activities. This theft is
44 often framed in survivalist and even revolutionary narratives which consistently link what is often
45 simply an economic venture to the broader social issues confronting the Niger Delta region. Paul
46 Ugor's (2013) study of artisanal refining in Gbekebor highlights the complex interface between illegal
47 artisanal refining and the broader questions of disempowerment and resistance in the region and
48 points out how everyday people can encroach on the spaces of power appropriated by the elite.
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52 Paying off aggrieved violent groups has paid off in the short term but cannot be a sustainable model
53 for guaranteeing long term peace and stability in the region. The lack of progress in key social issues
54 like poverty alleviation, economic opportunities, environmental security and infrastructure
55 investments justifies the criticism that has been levelled against both the logic of and implementation
56 of the Presidential Amnesty Programme. Scholars like Cyril Obi have raised questions about the
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ownership of the DDR process itself, arguing that ‘while it deals with DDR in a highly globalized, oil-rich, but impoverished region, involving one of the world’s most strategic resources, the Niger Delta and national elite are keen to legitimize it as a model ‘Nigerian solution’ to a rather intractable crisis, while at the same time seeking international support and endorsement’ (Obi 2014: 252).

The 2009 Amnesty and the reconstitution of a failing order

They buy guns for our youth; [...] ask our youths to kill one another and do others of their biddings[...] youths that the state had turned into cultists, hostage-takers, armed robbers, assassins, prostitutes and thugs [...] today their future is rocked with violence and evil (Naagbanton 2007, cited in HRW 2007).

They have even politicised this amnesty programme. They have dragged all our militant head[s] into politics. They have changed the mentality of our heads from freedom fighters into political activists (Tarela 2013 int.)

The violence in the Niger Delta in the immediate pre-amnesty period was so unprecedented and intense that it cut national oil production by about a third and disrupted global energy markets in ways only last seen in the 1990 Gulf War. However, remarkable as that was, the most critical implication for Nigeria was the way it threatened the grip of clientilistic networks on the politics of the oil rich region and how it may have irrevocably changed the structure of incentives in the country. In many ways, as will be demonstrated by this section, the amnesty was an attempt by the elite to regain control of clients, restore the incentives for participation in the clientilistic system and thus guarantee relative peace. To justify this assessment of the amnesty, I first take a look at the heightened violence of the immediate pre-amnesty period and argue that it was actually not so much a spike in the readiness of youth to violently assert claims against the state over environmental, identity or social justice questions, but rather that it was a crisis within the neopatrimonial system itself occasioned by the breakdown in the legitimacy of patrons. If this argument is made, then it is easier to see how the amnesty, in the way it has been structured, is very much a way of re-establishing the patron-client logic that underpins violence in the region and which ironically also keeps it in manageable proportions. I draw on the examples of Mujahid Asari-Dokubo and Ateke Tom,

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3 two of the most outspoken 'ex-militants' in the Niger Delta to show on the one hand how and
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5 why the 2003-2009 violence escalated and on the other, the kind of incentives through which
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7 the Amnesty has restored relative peace.
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11 *Unbridled violence and the patron-client relationship*
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14 Between 2003 and 2009, Niger Delta elite began to lose control of their clients in youth
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16 militias as the latter asserted agency. This can be linked to the clamp down on the 'resource
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18 control' discourse by President Obasanjo who resented the appropriation of a popular register
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20 of grievance by local politicians seeking to shore up their influence. The harassment of local
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22 elites culminated in the arrest and impeachment of former Governor of Bayelsa State, Chief
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24 Diepeye Alamaseiegha who had become central to ethno-nationalist claims against the
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26 Federal Government. This clampdown by the FG created a precarious context for alarmed
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28 Niger Delta patrons that created disincentives for maintaining links with clients in the
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30 region's youth militias and gangs. The appropriation of the 'resource control' discourse had
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32 been critical to the continued relevance and legitimacy of the Delta elite, particularly in the
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34 face of growing generational challenges to their leadership from increasingly impatient youth.
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36 By forcing them to abandon its active propagation therefore, the Obasanjo government
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38 denied them an important lever of control that ultimately disrupted the patron-client linkages
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40 through which they had kept youth gangs in relative check. Many studies corroborate this
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42 point by linking the collapse of public order and rise in insurgencies during that period to the
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44 abandonment of youth gangs that had been used by politicians to rig elections and intimidate
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46 opponents (HRW 2004, Ukeje 2006, Courson 2009, Osaghae et.al 2011, Ukeje and Iwilade
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48 2012).
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54 This point can be illustrated by the examples of Mujahid Asari-Dokubo, leader of the
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56 NDPVF and first vice president and later president of the IYC and Ateke Tom, leader of the
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3 NDV in the politics of Rivers State. A HRW report (2004: 14-19) detailed the extent of
4 violence and criminal intimidation that was deployed to challenge for the various offices on
5 offer during the 2003 general elections in Rivers State. In a situation quite common all over
6 the country but even more endemic in the oil producing states of the Niger Delta, many
7 young men were recruited for these violent acts by promises of ‘money, cars and trips to the
8 US in exchange for their efforts to “canvass the votes” for the PDP’ (HRW: 2004, 15). One
9 of the youth groups most visible during this period were Asari-Dokubo’s IYC and Ateke
10 Tom’s NDV.
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21 Ateke Tom himself, in an interview with HRW (2007: 81) acknowledged the role they played
22 in the 2003 elections and, more importantly the link to Governor Peter Odili. HRW reports
23 that in return for ‘cash and jobs in great quantities for himself and his “boys”, Ateke Tom
24 said ‘any place Odili sent me, I conquer[ed] for him. I conquer[ed] everywhere’. Shortly after
25 Peter Odili’s re-election with the help of these youth gangs, he began to project a more
26 national vision of politics partly as a way of enhancing his national appeal for a presidential
27 run he was planning for 2007. This required the tempering of the rhetoric of ‘resource
28 control’ which was not that popular with governing elites from other parts of the country, a
29 move that gradually diminished his standing with youth groups like the IYC. His ambition
30 also came in direct conflict with President Olusegun Obasanjo’s brewing agenda to remove
31 the constitutional term limit and contest for a third term in office. In his autobiography
32 published in 2012 Odili details the intrigues and betrayals that forced him out of the
33 presidential contest in 2007. He notes how the intimidation had started sometime in 2004 and
34 how he had done all he could to win the confidence of leaders like President Olusegun
35 Obasanjo. Some of these attempts to win the confidence of Obasanjo included disowning
36 youth groups like the IYC who were becoming increasingly vocal in appropriating the local
37 social and environmental justice rhetoric.
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3 By June 14, 2004 Odili had signed the Rivers Anti-Cult Law, which criminalized in one fell
4 swoop erstwhile youth collaborators of political and ethnic elites. In an attempt to crush the
5 out-spoken Asari-Dokubo, Odili is alleged to have given funds and arms to the NDV under
6 Ateke Tom to aid him in the violent struggle with Asari over control of oil bunkering
7 operations in the state. Why he decided to offer support to NDV instead of NDPVF can be
8 easily seen. As HRW (2007: 20) notes, Asari-Dokubo, owing to his IYC background, was
9 lacing his public comments with the narrative of social justice and resource control, a move
10 that made it quite politically inexpedient for Odili to continue to show overt public support
11 for him. It is interesting to note that the NDPVF which was later to play a central role in the
12 formation of MEND was created only in 2004 and largely in response to these pressures.
13 Asari's initial engagement was on the platform of the IYC.

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28 The violence that erupted in that period was so intense that hundreds of youth militia
29 members from both sides as well as scores of civilians were killed. The FG had deployed
30 troops who also worsened the situation by committing indiscriminate violations of human
31 rights and destruction of property (See *Tell Magazine*, June 28, 2004 p. 3-7, *The Port*
32 *Harcourt Telegraph*, September 13-19, 2004, p.9, *The Hard Truth*, May 27-June 2 2004, P.6,
33 *The Guardian*, July 8, 2004, p. 35). The declaration of war against the FG and multinational
34 oil companies by Asari-Dokubo was 'provoked by the government's attack on his base [...]
35 and his recognition that the state government's behind-the scenes diplomatic effort to resolve
36 the crisis threatened to marginalize him' (HRW: 2007, 20). The NDPVF however did not
37 simply declare war. Ever the astute manipulator of media and public discourse, Asari-Dokubo
38 cast his struggle in pan-Ijaw nationalist terms declaring that:

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52 [the struggle] has something to do with our Ijawness. The Nigerian state is stealing
53 from us, we say no more stealing of our resources. Give it back to us. Our language
54 and our culture which the Nigerian constitution has dubiously eliminated and said that

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3 it is Igbo, Hausa, Yoruba [...] that will be taught our children, we say no, we want to
4
5 speak our Ijaw language, exhibit our culture (*Newswatch* 2004, January 13, p.13).
6

7
8 As Human Rights Watch (2007: 20) rightly points out however, this pan-Ijaw nationalist
9
10 posturing does not fit with the evidence presented by the violence in and around Port
11
12 Harcourt in 2004 or, for that matter since then. It is important to note that MEND was not
13
14 formed until 2005 and it was created by an objective alliance of these very same groups who
15
16 had obviously morphed their narratives from simple armed groups responding to betrayal by
17
18 their patrons to 'resistance' movements seeking social and environmental justice. In this
19
20 regard, it is difficult to imagine the escalation of violence in the Niger Delta to the
21
22 unmanageable proportions it reached in the 2004-2009 period if these kinds of breakdowns in
23
24 patron-client trust did not occur. What is obvious from this account of clientilism in the Delta
25
26 is that 'resistance' has become an idiom that rationalizes, legitimizes and sustains different
27
28 kinds of social tensions, breakdowns and struggles. Even though marginalization remains a
29
30 legitimate source of grievance in the region, the escalation of violence that necessitated the
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32 2009 amnesty was very much a consequence of a breakdown in patron-client relations, only
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34 legitimized and rationalized with varied registers of ethno-nationalist and resource control
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36 grievances.
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45 *Restoring the order: incentives and payoffs in the amnesty programme*
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48 Quite often, the initial reaction of the Nigerian state to dissent is violent military crackdowns.
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50 This is evident in many civil disturbances that have erupted throughout the country's history
51
52 and a recent example would be the ongoing islamist uprising in northeast Nigeria. In the case
53
54 of the Niger Delta, the state maintained a two-pronged approach. The first was to crush the
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56 uprising through brutal force, while the second approach was to co-opt youths back into the
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3 patron-client system. The use of force did little to stop the insurgency but merely helped to
4
5 legitimize the rhetoric of resistance with which armed groups rationalized their violence. The
6
7 amnesty however did a lot to bring down the violence to proportions that no longer threaten
8
9 the extraction of oil and therefore the resources needed by the governing elite to maintain the
10
11 system of patronage that mediates power in the country.
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14
15 The amnesty offer included responsibilities, obligations and rights for all parties involved.
16
17 First, the state agreed not to prosecute anyone for ‘offences associated with militant
18
19 activities’ (Yar’ Adua in *The Vanguard*, June 25, 2009, p. 8), then it offered cash payouts,
20
21 training and education. In return, the now repentant militants would turn in their weapons,
22
23 refrain from attacking oil infrastructure or disrupting oil production and generally help to
24
25 maintain peace in the restive Niger Delta region. This arrangement offered gains for all
26
27 involved. For the militants, it brought reprieve from the unrelenting bombardment from the
28
29 Nigerian armed forces and greatly increased their political legitimacy. They could also
30
31 emerge from the creeks and enjoy the proceeds of their long running oil bunkering and
32
33 kidnapping activities. While these were obvious advantages to all parties concerned, the most
34
35 significant element of the amnesty was the way it co-opted restive youth and restored a
36
37 tenuous balance in the system of patronage. To demonstrate this claim, I draw on news
38
39 reports of contracts, pay-offs and other incentives offered to the militant commanders and
40
41 show how these have changed their relations with the state from the confrontation of the
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43 2003-2009 period to uncritical cooperation by 2013.
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49 To address the way the amnesty has changed the approach of militant commanders, I again
50
51 use the examples of Asari-Dokubo and Ateke Tom and also that of another major militant
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53 commander that has not been discussed earlier, Government Ekpemupolo. As noted earlier,
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55 the amnesty offer required militants to hand in weapons in exchange for training, cash
56
57 payouts and immunity from prosecution. Initially many of the commanders refused to accept
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3 this offer. Their reluctance was very much linked to the breakdown of trust between patrons
4 and clients that characterized that period. (Dis)trust is a crucial element of the neopatrimonial
5 system and it is the social capital around which the relationships are constructed (Budd 2004,
6 Bayart 2009, Chabal 2009, Peters 2011, Erdman 2013) To illustrate this, in 2004, the state
7 government under Peter Odili attempted to broker peace among the warring gangs. He
8 initiated what is now derided as the 'Millionaires Programme' where the government offered
9 1 million Naira (about 4100 Pound Sterling) to every youth who turned in a weapon. This
10 'weapon for cash' programme was supplemented by peace overtures to Mujahid Asari-
11 Dokubo and Ateke Tom whose rivalry was at the heart of the violence in the city of Port
12 Harcourt and its environs. After meetings with senior officials including President Obasanjo,
13 they agreed to a ceasefire and total disarmament. Before the peace could take hold however,
14 Asari-Dokubo accused the government of insincerity. In particular, he alleged that the state
15 government was maneuvering in favour of his rival, Ateke Tom. This irreparably broke down
16 relations between Odili and Asari-Dokubo (See CEHRD 2004, 2005 and Watts 2007). The
17 breakdown of the crucial patron-client trust eventually pushed Asari-Dokubo to desperately
18 seek the support of other militia groups like Government Ekpemupolo's 'Camp 5' and the
19 arms dealer Henry Okah. These alliances were eventually at the core of MEND when it was
20 formed in 2005 (Watts 2007, Nwajiaku-Dahou 2012, Ubhenin 2013).

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43 The 2009 amnesty programme did a lot to rebuild trust between the militants and elements
44 within the Nigerian government. Many Niger Delta elite actually, at great personal risk,
45 visited the militant camps in the creeks and tried to re-establish lines of dialogue with youth
46 fighters. To show the centrality of re-establishing personal trust, which is crucial to the
47 smooth running of any patrimonial system (Budd 2004), a majority of statements from
48 militants, militant organisations and youth organisations analyzed here in one way or the
49 other hint at the risk that insincerity places on the precarious peace being established (*The*
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3 *Vanguard*, September 19, 2009, p. 15-16, *This Day*, November 4, 2009, p. 7, *The Vanguard*,
4
5 February 3, 2010, p.5, *This Day*, February 3, 2010, p.10, *The Punch*, February 15, 2010, p. 3,
6
7 *The Vanguard*, March 16, 2010, p. 4-8, *The Guardian*, March 17, 2010, p. 14). It is
8
9 interesting to note that the insincerity relates not so much to the ‘development’ of the Niger
10
11 Delta as the narratives will suggest, but rather to the payoffs which the patrons promised in
12
13 exchange for the return of youth into clientelistic relations. To give a few examples, in 2010,
14
15 about a year into the amnesty programme, ‘General’ Monday, a militant commander who had
16
17 175 ex-militants registered from his camp in Bayelsa State complained about the sincerity of
18
19 government. Threatening to return to the creeks, he said: ‘the government is playing games
20
21 with us. They have not given us the training or the jobs they promised, they are even delaying
22
23 our money. We support MEND, we will return to the creeks’ (*The Guardian*, Feb 3, 2010, p.
24
25 6). Asari-Dokubo who incidentally insists that he has not accepted the amnesty, since,
26
27 according to him, it is ‘criminal and unknown to law’ (*The News*, January 21, 2013, p. 16),
28
29 also hinted at the link that keeps him from unleashing his gang on the oil industry. When
30
31 queried about whether his recent utterances criticizing the leadership of President Goodluck
32
33 Jonathan were as a result of threats to revoke pipeline protection contracts he had won shortly
34
35 after the amnesty offer was made, Asari-Dokubo (*The News*, January 13, 2013, p. 20) said:

40
41 It’s true, to some extent. I will not deny it. So if somebody takes food from my mouth,
42
43 me and my 18 children make we no eat [should we not feed?]? Jonathan dey eat for
44
45 Aso Rock with his children [The President, Goodluck Jonathan, is living comfortably]
46
47 [...] If Jonathan, with all my contributions, cancels my pipeline protection contract- if
48
49 I had one- I will fight him.
50

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52
53 Other ex-militant commanders like Government Ekpemupolo have also been co-opted into
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55 the elite networks with multi-million dollar contracts. Ubhenin (2013:184) reports that in
56
57 2011, the ‘Nigeria National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC) signed a 22.6 million Dollar a
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3 year contract with Ekpemupolo to guard and maintain pipelines his boys used to attack.
4
5 NNPC also gives 3.8 million Dollars yearly apiece to Generals Ebikabowei ‘Boyloaf’ Victor
6
7 Ben and Ateke Tom to have their men guard Delta pipelines they used to attack’. This claim
8
9 is corroborated by several newspaper reports that highlight the growing clout of ex-militants
10
11 and point to the way they have been co-opted by the governing elite and now play a role in
12
13 imposing the government’s values on other militants (see for instance *Wall Street Journal*,
14
15 August 22, 2012, *The Nation*, August 28 2012, *National Mirror*, January 13, 2013).

16
17 An informant with high level access in the Amnesty office, put it poignantly when,
18
19 responding to a question about the risk of recalcitrant militants returning to violence against
20
21 the state, he noted that
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23

24
25 ‘those leaders, the real leaders, [militant leaders], Tompolo [Government
26
27 Ekpemupolo] and co ensure that such things don’t happen. You know say dem don
28
29 come out come see life [you know they have now tasted the good life], so anybody
30
31 wey wan cause wahala, [any militant who tries to upset the tenuous peace] they say
32
33 “you take time”, [be careful] anybody wey no gree, dem go by themselves deal with
34
35 them [any agitator who refuses to heed such warning will be dealt with by the militant
36
37 commanders themselves] that is what they are doing’. (Egb 2013 int.).
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42 *Is this co-option trickling down?*
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45 It is easy to imagine that these nouveau rich militants whose violence has been rewarded and
46
47 incentivized by the state will be detached from the realities of other young people on the
48
49 ground. One reason the amnesty programme has been so successful in cutting down violence
50
51 against oil infrastructure however is because it has been a largely inclusive process. It is
52
53 inclusive in the sense that it hardly left out any willing youth who belonged to the disrupted
54
55 patron-client networks that were being reconstituted by the state. As a former militant Tarela
56
57 (2013 int.) told me,
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3 'nobody who carry gun [was an armed fighter] and wanted to participate in the
4
5 amnesty was left out. In fact, people had to go about looking for people to include.
6
7 Many of the commanders got slots more than the number of fighters. Even the JTF
8
9 people (soldiers deployed to the region) lobbied our commanders and got people
10
11 inside [into] the list. In my own case, I was able to include my girlfriend, my cousin
12
13 and another friend'.
14
15

16
17 This was corroborated by Egb when asked if there were militants who wanted to take the
18
19 amnesty offer but were systematically left out. He disagreed that this was happening saying
20
21 that 'there is no one among them who is not getting what is due to him'. The assumption of
22
23 many analysts of the amnesty programme is that its undoing is in its failure to include key
24
25 stakeholders like ordinary youth and women groups (Obi and Rustad 2011). However, this
26
27 assessment assumes that the amnesty is targeted at a general pool of Niger Delta youth rather
28
29 than an exclusive group of militants and their immediate hangers on who are connected to the
30
31 pre-2004 patronage network that was disrupted by the breakdown of trust and control
32
33 between patrons and clients. The evidence presented here suggests that the amnesty, in spirit
34
35 and letters, was never designed to include non armed fighters or youth who had been
36
37 marginal to the running of the pre-2004 patronage system in the region. This distinction is
38
39 important because it underscores the motivation for the offer of amnesty and the clientilistic
40
41 logic that underpins it.
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46 Even though many of the young fighters who have now accepted the amnesty offer and are
47
48 now being trained remain unhappy about the deal they have received so far, many of them
49
50 are acutely aware that their marginal place in the patron-client system offers very little space
51
52 for maneuver. They have been re-captured by a system over which they have little control
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54 notwithstanding their masculine bravado about being 'hard men' or having 'street
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56 credibility'. To underscore the coercion that the very fact of amnesty has guaranteed, I draw
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3 on the comment of Peter, another ex militant. Throughout my time with him, Peter did not
4
5 appear particularly impressed with the Nigerian government, the Amnesty or anything else
6
7 for that matter. He cut the picture of a truly discontented young man. I asked him why he
8
9 took the amnesty and he had this to say:
10

11
12 You cannot say, since you are part and parcel of the struggle, when your leaders have
13
14 already embraced it, you cannot say you cannot participate. [should] they leave you to
15
16 your fate [...] in the creek again, then you will find yourself to be blame[d] (Peter
17
18 2013, int).
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21
22 For those who dared to raise questions about the payoffs and the way it is being administered,
23
24 the experience of Tarela (2013 int.) at the amnesty office in Abuja is a common treatment. In
25
26 his words:
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28

29
30 They called me to Abuja [...] other people from other schools were there. [...]without
31
32 even giving me an opportunity to speak, they said by protesting I was threatening the
33
34 presidency [...]. Before I [understood what was going on] the SSS [State Security
35
36 Services] came in, handcuffed me and one of my colleagues and took us to the
37
38 guardroom. They forced us to write undertakings. All those things were being done to
39
40 shut us up [...] they seized our ID Cards and told us we were no longer in the
41
42 programme. We were even beaten up, you know? By Soldiers and SSS [...] the most
43
44 painful part of it is that when I reported to my commander, he just said I should shut
45
46 up. That what was I complaining about. We are just managing the situation [enduring
47
48 the situation] now because there is no choice'.
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52
53 At the moment, it is this reconstitution of the patron-client relations that has guaranteed
54
55 relative peace in the Niger Delta. However, as will be shown in the next section, the elements
56
57 of another collapse of the system, fulfilling what Pratten (2013) called its 'precarious' nature
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3 are inevitably built into the amnesty. It is true that young people are highly constrained both
4
5 by a system of structural marginalisation and by the patron-client relations that shapes access
6
7 to state resources, however, there is evidence that they are engaging and manipulating this
8
9 disempowering context in highly innovative ways and are exercising agency in ways that
10
11 may be hidden to binary narratives of greed and grievance.
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17 **“They have made a mistake of educating some of us”: Amnesty, youth ripostes and the**
18 **limits of patronage**
19

20 *“In the moment of crisis, the wise build bridges and the foolish build dams”.* Ijaw Proverb
21

22
23 The fragile peace prevailing in the Delta fits the idiom of bridges and dams as the amnesty
24
25 could be re-read as reflecting patrons building ‘dams’ to contain youth rather than bridges
26
27 (education, health, infrastructure and the like) through which generations of young people can
28
29 fulfill their potential. This chapter demonstrates that even though the amnesty programme
30
31 appears to be effectively reconstituting neopatrimonial relations, a counter hegemonic
32
33 process is also going on simultaneously. There are indications that youth are renegotiating
34
35 power and control in very meaningful ways in the region and that they are using the very
36
37 structure of dominance that neopatrimonialism now depends on—the amnesty programme- to
38
39 do this. They are doing this by subverting the process of inclusion, building their own
40
41 networks and most importantly remaining acutely aware of their positions of
42
43 disempowerment and continuing to bear grudges against a system that has so dehumanized
44
45 them. A growing number of the excluded are also exploiting the gradual demilitarization to
46
47 ramp up oil theft and illegal crude oil refining. As will be shown here, the amnesty inevitably
48
49 contains the ingredients of its own collapse, thereby justifying recent arguments that the
50
51 patron-client system is fundamentally insecure and the positions of all actors remain
52
53 precarious (Pratten 2013).
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3 Recent analyses of the amnesty have tended to focus on the co-option of the main militant
4 commanders like Asari-Dokubo, Government Ekpemupolo and Ateke Tom (Nwajiakwu-
5 Dahou 2010, Obi and Rustad 2011). Useful as this may be however, it ignores what may be
6 going on among younger 'ex militants' who do not have the kind of high profile access to
7 centers of power that these men have and who are often far less content with the status-quo
8 and thus more likely to challenge its neopatrimonial logic. It also does not factor in the
9 excluded ones who exploit the relative peace of the amnesty to engage in oil theft (bunkering)
10 and illegal oil refining and what these may tell us about the agency of youth within the
11 context of neopatrimonialism.
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24 *'We are all militants': inclusion as subversion*

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27 The stated goal of government in the amnesty proclamation was to pardon and rehabilitate
28 'every person that [had] committed offenses related to militancy' (Yar'Adua 2009). As it
29 turned out however, a good percentage of young people in the programme did not commit
30 offenses against the state and even where they did, it could not be accurately linked to
31 militancy. The state aims, through the amnesty, to re-capture clients who, as a consequence of
32 ruptures in the neopatrimonial system, have borne arms against it and in doing so have
33 appropriated the rhetoric of resistance. However, as one of my informants in the amnesty
34 office in Abuja put it,
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45 'it is not only these touts [militants who actually bore arms] that were in the creeks
46 that are here. It's funny when you find a young boy of 15 come out to say "I'm a
47 militant". I don't know how they get the guns they bring. I heard one boy stole his
48 father's gun and came to register. He had a friend in the Obubra camp [a camp set up
49 by the government at Obubra in Cross River State to process repentant militants] and
50 just came. There are many like that who have sneaked into the amnesty. To chase
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3 them out is to cause problems, so they are there side by side with the real ones.’ (Egb,
4
5 2013 int.).
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8 As the above indicates, young people in the Niger Delta saw the amnesty as a short route to
9
10 social becoming and independence and as a result there was a scramble to ‘acquire the status
11
12 of militancy’ which qualified individuals for inclusion (Nwajiakwu-Dahou 2010: 6). This was
13
14 partly a result of lack of clarity in how inclusion was to be determined but there is evidence
15
16 that many young people deliberately subverted the process to compete for what they believed
17
18 was both their right as ‘indigenes’ of the Niger Delta and a rare entry point to state resources.
19
20 Francis Bonga (2013 int.), illustrates the contradiction between the state’s notion of who a
21
22 militant is and the way this is defined by Delta youth. Responding to a question about why
23
24 ‘non-militants’ (that is young people who were never armed fighters) get included in the
25
26 amnesty, he had this to say:
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31 We [the youth] classify everybody as militants, not that you participated or not
32
33 [whether you were directly involved in the violence or not], everybody can claim to
34
35 be a militant. I know someone who is a vigilante member in Amasoma who is now
36
37 [classified as] a “General” in the amnesty. The guy bought the slots from the military
38
39 people. Even some real militants now follow him because he has connections. The
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41 thing is the government thinks one thing, but we think another.
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45 This is corroborated by a number of other young people I interviewed which indicates that
46
47 they have created their own meaning, driven not by the needs of the state or even of the
48
49 militant commanders, but rather by their marginality within the system of patronage. Tarela
50
51 (2013 int.) put it quite starkly when he said:
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55 During Yar’Adua’s amnesty deal [...], he said all agitators, but we call our self
56
57 freedom fighters, [...] So when they gave amnesty, [...] the beneficiaries were not just
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3 those that took up arms, [...] in fact anybody that is affected, can be anybody from the
4
5 region, have a right to be there. [...] in fact armed robbers that were in jail, cultists in
6
7 jail saw the opportunity to come out and [...] found ways to join the amnesty.
8
9

10 Apart from reading the amnesty in ways that allow individual material needs to be met,
11
12 young people, especially those who were not directly integrated within the 'militant'
13
14 networks had to find innovative ways to subvert the process of inclusion which threatened to
15
16 exclude them from the amnesty. The incredible story of Tony Obiakolor (2013 int.), a young
17
18 man of about 29 from Ekeremor in Bayelsa State, who is currently enrolled in the amnesty
19
20 programme illustrates the innovative ways young people have manipulated access to the
21
22 amnesty by subverting the law and expressing agency in ways often missed by accounts that
23
24 focus on co-opted militant commanders. After struggling without success to integrate into a
25
26 militant group in the years before the amnesty, Tony had become close to a pastor of a small
27
28 Pentecostal church. When the offer of amnesty was announced, Tony narrates his first
29
30 feelings:
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36 'I was with Pastor R in his office when I heard over the radio [that amnesty had been
37
38 proclaimed]. Something told me that my time has come to escape [poverty]. I was
39
40 worried since I never joined real militants. I knew it will be very difficult [to be
41
42 included], but I trusted God for his favours. I called my brother in Warri who knew
43
44 some politicians to ask him about the details. [...]. I was just there calculating, the
45
46 pastor was praying, but [I was instead plotting how to benefit from the amnesty].
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48

49
50 Between June and October 2009 when the amnesty offer was to expire, Tony frantically
51
52 contacted many different people to make enquiries about how he could be included to no
53
54 avail until in late September 2009, he remembered that a very senior politician from
55
56 neighbouring Cross River State was close to his pastor. In his words:
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3 After running around with no luck, I realized that Pastor R had one big politician who
4 he always prayed for over the phone. I picked up his phone one day and got the man's
5 number. I then sent a threat text to the man [pretending] to be from the Black Axe [A
6 violent campus cult group]. I knew he was going to call pastor [for prayers about the
7 threat]. I then started [pestering the pastor] that God says he should pray for the man.
8
9 By the time the man called him, I [had] convinced pastor to [ask the politician] about
10 [me] joining the amnesty. I know this is not Godly, but [What else could I have
11 done?]. Opportunity come [s] only once.
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21 I had doubts about this story initially because it sounded too good to be true, but a search
22 through the newspapers around the period he claimed to have sent these text messages, turned
23 up the story of cult threats to a very senior politician from Cross River state (*This Day*,
24 September 21, 2009, p.6, *The Punch* September 22, 2009, p. 19). This may or may not be
25 Tony, but it does lend credence to his story and illustrates the complexity of the narrative of
26 violence in the Delta, and the dangers of depending on a single way of explaining the region.
27 Tony's story illustrates the ability of many young people to subvert and/or manipulate the
28 process of inclusion in the amnesty in spite of their marginality.
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40 *The ones left behind: Oil theft as an idiom of youth agency*

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43 *In 2012, JTF conducted 7585 illegal bunkering patrols in the region resulting in the arrest of*
44 *1,945 suspects, and the destruction of 4,349 crude oil cooking ovens commonly referred to as*
45 *illegal refineries (Sunday Mirror, February 3, 2013, p.12)*
46
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50 Three years after the amnesty was launched, oil theft and illegal refining have remained a
51 major issue. There is a sense in which the persistence of this problem can be read as a product
52 of the amnesty itself. Of course oil theft predated the amnesty, however, the programme
53 appears to have shifted the locus of 'insurgency' from violent attacks against the military and
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3 oil industry personnel to the deliberate sabotage of oil infrastructure for explicit material
4
5 purposes. Stripped of the rhetoric of resistance, oil thieves have become an even greater
6
7 threat to oil infrastructure than they were in the pre-amnesty period. To understand the
8
9 complexity of oil theft in the Niger Delta, it is crucial to consider the shifting arena of
10
11 alliances in and around the quest to secure access to this lucrative industry and the
12
13 labyrinthine web of interests that drive it. This complex web connects politicians, the
14
15 military, militants and even officers of oil multinationals to highly sophisticated international
16
17 criminal networks who insert the stolen oil into the global market (Peel 2009, Obi 2010,
18
19 Nwajiaku-Dahou 2012, Ugor 2013). The objective compromise reached between militants
20
21 and their patrons in 2009 appears to have done very little to end what Nwajiaku-Dahou
22
23 (2012: 296) refers to as a 'semi-officially sanctioned trade' in stolen crude. As reported by a
24
25 number of national dailies, the theft of crude oil has in fact now expanded significantly
26
27 outside the Niger Delta region itself to include neighbouring Lagos, Oyo, Ogun and Kwara
28
29 states (*The Nation*, January 22, 2013, p.4, *Daily Mirror*, February 3, 2013, p. 4 -5, *National*
30
31 *Mirror*, March 1, 2013, p.11, March 6, 2013, p. 35-38).

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37 One of the ways in which the re-capturing of militant youth by the neopatrimonial system
38
39 was secured was through the granting of multimillion dollar pipeline monitoring and
40
41 safeguarding contracts (Nwajiaku-Dahou 2010). Even though these contracts are framed as
42
43 open and competitive business transactions, there is little doubt about the neopatrimonial
44
45 logic that underpins it and the uncanny resemblance it bears to the payoffs oil multinationals
46
47 often made to 'oil producing' or 'host' communities in the region. The persistence of oil theft
48
49 raises important questions about how much control ex-militant commanders have on the
50
51 activities of smaller groups and individuals who still make a living out of the theft of crude
52
53 oil. It also raises questions about the extent to which these kinds of contracts can breakdown
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3 the complex networks and interests to which the lucrative trade in stolen oil is consistently
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5 linked (Peel 2009, Nwajiaku-Dahou-2010).
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8 Recent news reports indicate that the persistence of oil theft is not unconnected to emerging
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10 ruptures in the amnesty, with 'ex-militants', many of who are currently receiving benefits
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12 from the state, being key players. Ugor's (2013) extensive ethnographic work on oil theft in
13
14 the Delta demonstrates that the expansion of the underground oil economy is a fall out of the
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16 failures of the amnesty to satisfy the expectations of young people lower ranked in the
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18 'insurgent' hierarchy. This is corroborated by police reports of arrests of many 'ex-agitators'
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20 who now combine participation in the amnesty with 'oil-bunkering' (Hamid Abba 2013 int.).
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24 Many of the young people I spoke to did not admit to direct participation in oil theft. This is
25
26 understandable as any post 2009 vandalism of pipelines is not covered by the presidential
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28 amnesty and so carries the risk of arrest. However, they generally agreed that some 'ex-
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30 agitators' are indeed still participating in the lucrative trade in stolen oil. More importantly,
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32 they gave interpretations of this act that justify re-reading it as an idiom of social protest and
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34 youth agency. As Francis Bonga (2013 int.) put it,
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39 There are creeks where this thing [oil theft] is still going on. In the interior of Rivers
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41 state, even now, the bunkering activities is [are] going on. [...] They are doing this for
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43 the sake of money not fighting the government. It is a business [trade], a way of
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45 making money. If the big men [the militant commanders] are making so much money
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47 from their contracts, the boys have a right to take a small extra cut. How much is 65,
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49 000 naira [what is the value of the stipend given]? [...] some will tell you to your face
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51 that "what are [were] we fighting for?, what we need is money. [...] Why should I go
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53 and fight for somebody seating in his office?" some of these boys have run into debt,
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55 especially this third phase [the demobilization and integration process is done in
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3 batches] because they borrow money to buy the arms they give to the JTF to be
4 included. [...] The boys are also angry that even though they all fought together, some
5 people are making more money. They now go to [the pipeline infrastructure covered
6 by contracts given to particular militant commanders] and break it, they take their
7 own share. The amnesty doesn't mean the boys [young ex-militants] don't know
8 what to do or how to do it.
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17 Corroborating Francis, another informant, Egb (2013 int.) hinted that discontent with the
18 distributive politics of the amnesty programme is partly responsible for the upsurge in oil
19 theft. Explainign why some ex-militants would continue with oil theft, he said:
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24 Some [un]scrupulous elements are still there. No matter how well the amnesty is
25 organized [there will be discontent]. The problem is you just can't control these boys.
26 They are complaining about [ex-militant commanders] and their billion naira
27 contracts. They just want to make their own money too. Nobody wants thousands in
28 the Niger Delta anymore. At least you have heard of Arepo [a small town in Ogun
29 State, outside the Niger Delta where a fire incident from a vandalized pipeline
30 resulted in the death of hundreds of people]? Do you think it is Yoruba people who
31 did that? It's the same boys! They are taking laws into their own hands because they
32 know that with amnesty there is no real JTF again to catch them.
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45 Two fundamental themes run through these comments. First is that 'ex-militants' continue to
46 play a role in the theft of oil and second that this role is not only increasingly outside the
47 control of the familiar symbols of authority (ex-militant commanders, politicians and the
48 armed forces) but also that young people are justifying this with narratives of either outright
49 exclusion from the system or discontent about its distributive politics. In these, one can see a
50 familiar pattern of youth engagement emerging but which is being driven by a marginal new
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3 set of actors making claims against the system. One striking thing about this that makes it
4 potentially more destabilizing than the pre 2009 oil theft is that it does not have pretensions
5 about being an ‘insurgency’ and can therefore take the shape of organized criminal networks
6 like in the drug trade in Colombia and Mexico without the accompanying inhibitions that
7 social norms and structures of authority can impose. One may understand this by looking at
8 scholarly interpretations of the distinction between the Kamajor militia in Sierra Leone who
9 operated within and around their communities during the civil war and were thus held in
10 check by local idioms of justice and restraint and the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) that
11 could rely only on extreme brutality to impose its will on the communities it preyed upon
12 (Richards 1998, Peters 2011).
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26 *‘They have made a mistake of educating some of us’*
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29 The sense that one gets from interacting with many ex-militants now receiving education in
30 universities across Nigeria is that even though they are grateful for the opportunity to be
31 educated, they are far from convinced that the ‘struggle’ is over. As a particularly eloquent
32 one put it:
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38 The Niger Delta Master Plan has been swept under the carpet. They have dragged all
39 our militant heads into politics [...] as they sent us to school, it is a good thing. But it
40 is a disadvantage to them because by the time we get educated we will even [be more
41 organized]. By then we will have become more advanced [and] more educated. So
42 what should be done should be done well. They are concentrating on human
43 development but are ignoring infrastructural development. [...]. For them to bring us
44 to school, they are doing themselves [a] greater harm. It will be uncontrollable by the
45 time many of us graduate from the university. (Tarela. 2013 int.)
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57 Another said:
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3 As a student of international relations, after graduation, I will like to fall back to my
4 region [...] To know where to get involved. Since I know what it takes to be a
5 graduate and I know what these graduates have been doing with our oil. [...] we will
6
7 be more prepared to fight for the rights of the Niger Delta (Peter. 2013 int.).
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12 What these comments show is that the perception of neglect and marginalisation that enabled
13 violence to be so deeply embedded in the social fabric of the Niger Delta has not abated even
14 within the 're-captured' ranks of ex-militants. These comments also indicate ruptures in the
15 pattern of control as young 'ex-militants' increasingly resent the patronage received by ex-
16 commanders. Stripped of their 'revolutionary' fervor and the machinery to dispense
17 patronage by the amnesty, militant commanders are increasingly incapable of controlling
18 younger members of the rapidly disintegrating groups. This uncontrolled space of authority is
19 however, as is evident from the comments above, not being filled by politicians or by any
20 adult dominated structure of control.
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33 There are numerous media reports about 'ex-militants protesting against specific distributive
34 aspects of the amnesty. Many of these are held without the support of senior commanders
35 which is an indication that authority structures within militant groups are breaking down (*The*
36 *Vanguard*, March 16, 2010, p. 4, *The Guardian*, March 17, 2010, p.13, *The Hard Truth* May
37 24, 2012, p.2, *National Mirror*, February 27, 2013, p.11 March 1 2013, p.43). Instead, there
38 is evidence that new social networks are being built across erstwhile competing 'militant'
39 camps and across the 'armed fighter'- 'non-fighter' divide in ways that are diffusing
40 structures of authority and control. Anders Themner's (2012) treatment of the role of mid-
41 level commanders in shaping informal social networks of power in post conflict contexts
42 offers an interesting way in which we may look at the kind of re-organisation that is going on
43 among young people enrolled in the amnesty. As Themner (2012: 218) suggests, to
44 understand post conflict politics and the role of ex-fighters in them, it is crucial to focus on
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3 the more intimate embeddedness of mid-level commanders within the social networks of ex-
4 fighters rather than the increasingly out of touch main warlords whose ability to represent the
5 everyday interest of young ex-fighters diminishes the more they are co-opted into the patron-
6 client system. In the case of Niger Delta ex-militants, new networks are emerging that are
7 bound together by common concerns about the distributive politics of amnesty and the
8 prospects of life at the end of it rather than by the incentives for criminal accumulation that
9 former commanders once provided. Operating below the radar of both the state and senior
10 militant commanders, these young people hold meetings, pool resources and elect leaders.
11 Erstwhile competitors from different militant camps, some of who had engaged each other in
12 deadly gun battles in 2003 and 2007, have now found common ground in their general
13 discontent with the distributive politics of the amnesty. Many of the ex-militants I met were
14 from different parts of the Niger Delta and might not have had contact were it not for the
15 amnesty. With the new relationships being built, many of them are confident that they will be
16 better organized in the next, perhaps inevitable phase of 'insurgency' in the region.
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35 **Conclusion**

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37 What I have done in this paper is to show how youth violence in the Niger Delta and the
38 amnesty programme designed to contain it reflect crisis within the neopatrimonial system of
39 relations which mediate power in Nigeria. I argued that the collapse of public order in the
40 Niger Delta in the period between 2003 and 2009 which, at its peak, cut oil production by
41 about 30 percent and forced a brutal military crackdown, was not as much an 'insurgency'
42 against the state to protest social injustice and disempowerment as it was a crisis of the
43 neopatrimonial system itself. In making this argument, I use the example of Rivers, Nigeria's
44 richest 'oil-producing' state and the heart of the oil industry, to trace the role of ruptures in
45 the distributive politics of the patron-client system which connected politicians to armed
46 gangs in the eruption of violence. I argue that the pre 2003 violence was very much a
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3 performative one which served the purpose of neopatrimonialism (Watts 2007, Nwajiaku-
4 Dahou 2012) and thus required only half hearted state responses. The escalation in 2003, in
5 the wake of post election claims by various armed clients, was however significant because it
6 degenerated into levels that threatened the ability of the state to obtain revenue. The 2009
7 amnesty offer was therefore designed to restore the neopatrimonial order and not necessarily
8 to end an 'insurgency' in the sense of resolving the development and disempowerment
9 questions being raised by many watchers of the region. To demonstrate this, I draw
10 extensively on surveys by organisations like HRW and CEHRD, newspaper articles from the
11 period and interview data from 'ex-militant' sources to show how the rupture occurred in the
12 first place and the way in which the amnesty programme is being mobilized to reconstitute
13 neopatrimonial relations.
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28 Even though the amnesty is clearly reconstituting the neopatrimonial logic of social relations
29 and accumulation in the Delta, I show how youths who are supposedly 'recaptured' through
30 the amnesty are able to express agency in spite of the highly constraining context. This
31 counter hegemonic process has gone generally unnoticed in both scholarly and popular
32 narratives of the impact of the amnesty programme as a result of disproportionate focus on
33 senior militant commanders. I however use insights from Themner's (2012) work on mid-
34 level commanders in Sierra Leone to illustrate why it is important to watch the impact of
35 post-conflict political re-alignments on the emergence of new dominant actors and
36 potentially, new conflict trajectories. There is a sense in which the next phase of conflict
37 appears inevitable in the Niger Delta. The tendency by the Nigerian state to simply re-capture
38 clients as a conflict resolution model is unlikely to sustain peace. At the heart of this potential
39 relapse is the agency of youth in the oil rich region and the way they eventually understand
40 the distributive politics of amnesty.
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3 An important question that arises from the above is whether ending violence and
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5 reconstituting a clientelistic order are necessarily irreconcilable goals. In general, there is
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7 little reason to believe that this should be so given that peace is often required to facilitate
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9 accumulation. In the case of the Delta however, certain levels of violence are required for the
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11 patrimonial order, as it is constituted, to work effectively. The clientelistic order is dependent
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13 on the informalisation of power and is mediated by the ability of the privileged to both
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15 perform and inflict violence. What is disruptive to the order is unbridled violence that appears
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17 outside the control of patrons. This is precisely what happened in the period under review and
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19 why the Amnesty is conceptualized as designed to reconstitute a failing order. The continued
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21 low level violence seen within the Niger Delta and the reluctance of the Nigerian elite to fully
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23 clamp down on known violent groups is consistent with a perception within the political elite
24
25 that access to privatized violence is an important lever of power. It also illustrates the point
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27 being made here about the relevance of violence as a network builder. The value of this
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29 access was evident in the 2015 elections in Rivers State where political competition was both
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31 stiff and violent and was largely a result of 'ex-militant' activities (Premium Times May 13,
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33 2015, Ezemalu 2015, SDN 2015).

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39 Interestingly, the classic models of neopatrimonialism which attempt to explain politics in the
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41 African postcolony through cultural, institutional, ethnic or governance frames (Sandbrook
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43 1972, Ekeh 1975, Chabal and Daloz 1999, Smith 2006, Bayart 2009) all ignore the agency of
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45 clients. By situating postcolonial politics in the dynamic and often brutal contestation to
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47 capture state institutions, these models fail to account for the shifting nature of actors and the
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49 innovative ways in which clients are able to shape, as much as be shaped, by the system. As
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51 the stories of Tony, Tarela and Peter show, there is a sense in which neopatrimonial theory
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53 has excluded the voice of those who challenge its patron-client relations in increasingly
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55 sophisticated and effective ways at the same time that they define their life chances and goals
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3 within the very strictures and incentives that it creates. This article moves the literature a step
4 further to rethinking what the underground system of ‘becoming’, defined as the very
5 antithesis of the neopatrimonial logic of ‘capture’, can tell us about the changing nature of
6 power. By drawing on and reconstituting local idioms of justice, youth actors have turned the
7 classic neopatrimonial process of capture that underpins the amnesty into a space for
8 ‘becoming’ as well as a space ‘of protest’. The classic *neopatrimonialist* tropes of ethnicity,
9 culture, disorder and so on that have been used to explain social mobilization in postcolonial
10 Africa have clearly not been as important to the lives of the young men I investigated. The
11 implication is that neopatrimonial paradigms continue to utilise frames that are fundamentally
12 disconnected from the existential realities of a violent postcolonial context. So while there is
13 a neopatrimonial logic which offers a more adequate explanation for social ruptures in the
14 postcolony, particularly in the sense of formal institutions interacting with informal patterns
15 of authority, explaining what drives this logic and how it is animated in the specific context
16 of the violent postcolony are questions that are far from being settled.

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35 Obviously there is a lot of research that still needs to go into how we conceptualize the role of
36 social shifters like youth as clients in a postcolonial rentier state. If we are to grasp the
37 bewildering register of grievance and the underlining currents of individual motivations and
38 coping strategies that emerge to challenge the neopatrimonial logic, we need to move beyond
39 ethnicity, culture and large scale institutions to seek answers in the ordinary agency of people
40 both empowered and disempowered by the very fact of their marginality.

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49 Political theory also needs to encounter the Niger Delta in far more nuanced ways than is
50 currently obtainable. Rationalist critiques that construct false binaries of resistance and
51 repression can only take us so far, as they are fundamentally incapable of engaging with the
52 shifting nature of actors, interests, motivations and alliances in the Delta. Concepts like
53 corporate social responsibility, environmental degradation and infrastructural development
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3 make little sense if they are not considered as serving both real and performative roles in the
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5 politics of the Delta. No place does the irrelevance of these concepts make itself more deeply
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7 felt than in the naked neopatrimonialism that structures and is structured by the politics of
8
9 amnesty.
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